

Pentecost 5

June 27, 2010

Luke 9:51-62 and 1 Kings 19:15-21

Let me tell you a little about Steve. We've been praying for Steve for a couple of weeks. Steve is married and the father of two grown daughters. He's a grandfather – two grandsons. Another thing, I suppose you should know about Steve is that he's dying. He's home. He's as comfortable as I think he can be, well cared for by his family and a hospice team, but his end is near now, he can see it.

Steve has spent the last couple of months putting things in order – not just distributing his accumulated stuff or setting up funeral services and burial plans, but inviting people to come to his bedside in hopes of reconciling. Even though it takes a tremendous amount of effort and energy, it's well worth the time, especially because that's really all he can do, all that's within his power to do. His family works, caring for him, tending to him, loving him, but slowly, painfully, sorrowfully they will have to let that go too and commend him into God's hands.

And there it is in brilliant clarity ... at the end of things – end of life, end of ourselves, even the end of job or the end of a relationship – in times of transition, we see a little more clearly how life is really out of our control. We must trust God. Trust ourselves into God's hands and God's care. That is difficult, almost impossible to do on our own. But at the end, we can see how those things we held so closely and cherished so dearly, the things we fought for and feared losing, those things we thought meant so much, or hoped at last held the secret to our happiness, our security, our self preservation, must, at end be surrendered, let go of, renounced.

Last week pastor talked about getting trapped in Pharaoh's tomb. Me, as a person plagued by clutter that comes from accumulating stuff, I have to chuckle at the thought of needing an entire pyramid to store my stuff in a futile attempt to take it with me. How like me. How unlike Steve, though.

I think, painful as it may be, his last renunciation is freedom. I cannot tell you what Steve thinks or feels, but I pray, I trust, I believe – even in his sorrow – that at his end his is finding a peace that passes understanding, discovering a freedom that comes by letting go and trusting, following Jesus. That's really all he can do, now ... wait, trust, love, which is all that Steve's infant grandson can do for himself.

So, it was a powerful thing a few weeks ago to spend some time talking to Steve, praying with Steve, anointing his head with oil, inviting him to let go of this life and take hold of the gift of life found in Jesus. Together, we commended Steve to God's care and then we wheeled out of his room, into his living room, where he could witness his grandson's baptism.

A baby with his whole life ahead of him, but no more a life in control and no less a life in God's hands, God's care. That's the great repentance that gives order to our baptism liturgy. We turn away from those things that accumulate, those things the world values, those things that hold out promises for our future, our security, but in the end are only powerless, lifeless things. We turn away from these things so Steve's grandson doesn't get bound, trapped, enslaved by this stuff. We turn our backs on those things and deliver this baby into God's hands, God's care. By water – life-ending and, at the same, time life-giving, life sustaining water – and the creative Word of God, God takes all

Cooper as he is and makes him something new, a child of God. Even though, he's just a baby there at that bowl of water he came to his end. There's no going back.

You see, this baby with his whole life ahead of him, and you and I with our whole lives ahead of us, and even Steve with his whole life ahead of him, we all have come to our end and discovered that life, real life, is a gift from God.

Elisha understood this, I think, better than most. Elisha is not a poor man when God tells Elijah to go and choose him as a prophet. He has more than enough of the stuff that makes for happiness. He's plowing his fields with 12 yoke of oxen – lined up like the combines on the plains. When Elijah calls him, Elisha excuses himself, appearing to turn back from the call, but he goes home, slaughters his yoke of oxen, cooks them with the wood of his plow and distributes the meat to the people and he goes and follows Elijah, never to go back. He renounces his old life. He follows God's call. He is free to live.

That is Jesus – not only his call to us, but his model for mission. Jesus leaves everything behind for the sake of God and God's kingdom. It's for us – for you and I and Cooper and Steve and this world of people, abounding in life of all kinds yet trapped at every turn by death; it is for us and for this world that Jesus turns and sets his face to go to Jerusalem, to die, to rise again, to set us free, to deliver us safe and sound into God's hands, God's care, God's kingdom. All this is free, God's gift to us in Jesus. Free, a gift, but it costs us everything. He takes us as we are, and we will never be the same.

He died for us so that we too might come to our end, die to sin – all kinds of sin and broken-ness, emptiness and grief; He rose again so that we might have life and discover that life is what God gives us in Jesus. Jesus' death and resurrection frees us to live ... because Jesus lives.

Watching Steve and his family, I realize how difficult it is to die. To leave house and home, friends and family and the accumulated stuff of life lived well. He is, in effect turning it all in, handing everything over, letting go, renouncing it all. And that is not easy. But God's promise, Jesus' own life-giving guarantee, is that the life is what God gives, life that's just beginning, life that's still to come, life that's resurrection and far surpasses anything we have known or could imagine. That's good news. Good news for Steve and good news for us.

That's the good news of God's love that liberates us to live that kind of life, now. And, it is a difficult thing to live, too.

Pretty soon – less than a year, probably, baby Cooper will be off and walking. The basic steps he learns now will set the pattern for walking his whole life. Jesus' call to discipleship too is an invitation to walk with Jesus to the cross and the empty tomb, a life lived out in following him. But the walk, the mechanics of it all follows the steps we first learned in the liturgical pattern of our baptism – dying and rising, giving and receiving.

In that way, Steve and Cooper walk the same. And so do we. Each day, we face our death, each day God gives us life and freedom. Each day, Jesus takes us as we are, and he makes us something new.

So, your free to live, free to live as Jesus lived – filled to overflowing with God's love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control – in other words, as a blessing to the world, dying and rising daily ... commended into God's hands, trusting in his mercy, through Jesus. Amen.