

In the Name of the Living God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Show of hands...how many here have been interviewed....for a job or a position? OK. Again, by a show of hands, have any of you also served, on other occasions, as the interviewer? Very well.

Can we agree that the biggest need is to make that a solid first impression? To somehow demonstrate or convey a level of earnest desire in order to “nail” the interview? Chances are that if you are interviewing for a position, you know, or should know intuitively, that the cell phone needs to be off...you do not have garlic at supper the night before...you are groomed and dressed appropriately. You want to look “all in” with full commitment and interest, with no distractions or hesitation.

Today's gospel gives us some insight....into what is really an interview. An interview by Jesus. And, before we start thinking right away that this gospel reading has nothing to do with us in that context, I politely invite you to think again...particularly when it comes to discipleship. Because it all really comes down to everyday, daily personal interaction with others...at all levels, and especially in this very day and age. We will look for a parallel example, but start with the gospel for today.

Right at the beginning, the journey to Jerusalem has a less than auspicious beginning. “He sent messengers ahead of him, and they went and entered a Samaritan village to prepare for him. But the people there did not welcome him, because he was set on going to Jerusalem”. In case we do not know the history of the extreme animosity between Jews and Samaritans, as detailed in Luke 10:25-37, it is not surprising that the Samaritans refuse to show hospitality to the traveling prophet, Jesus, and his followers. So, surprise...surprise, the disciples, James and John, offer an immediate remedy that they believe has scriptural authority: “Lord, do you want us to tell fire to come down from heaven and wipe them out?”, echoing Elijah’s summoning heavenly fire in Second Kings.

Why did James and John do that? It is a common and natural reaction...like getting hit in the stomach when someone rejects us on any level firsthand, particularly about cherished beliefs. When confronted directly, we recognize the need to justify our views, to prove we are right. Defend our faith. But we do not stop there. We also have the impulse to attack, ratchet up how that person is wrong, misguided, even unfaithful. If we have structural or institutional power, we may move to shut them down and “command fire to come down from heaven and consumer them”, figuratively if not literally. Get caught in cycles and cycles of reactivity.

These responses are identical, if not worse, in our contemporary world. Non-stop, outrageous,

uncontrolled reaction to any perceived, let alone real disagreement or slight. If any of us are active or even spectators on social media...or if you even turn on the news in any form...you cannot avoid it. I invite each of us to revisit your own Facebook feeds which highlight or exclaim against other viewpoints and triumph your own. We may be quick to “like” on Facebook a political opponent getting what is coming to him or her. We proudly proclaim our outrage at the adjudged ignorance or hard-heartedness of others. Even in the church, in our own denomination in this very state, we may aggressively police the doctrinal purity of other congregations in other dioceses.

“Being right” is a powerful and dangerous drug, closely tied to self-righteousness. It feels so good to be right! To win! To know that God is on our side! “Yay” for us, and “Boo” everyone else! Our Christian history demonstrates that triumphalism is our besetting sin, and it is a subtle and short step from rejoicing in the good news of Jesus Christ to attacking those who will not share in it. Our history shows that when we have the power to harm others we consider outside our circle of triumph, we are likely to use it.

And, guess what? If we are really true to the gospel, we clearly see that Jesus will have none of it. His answer is to rebuke his disciples and then instruct them to get on with the work of the gospel. “They went on to another village.” Jesus will not let James and John stop to argue or entrench themselves there. This is not a contest to see who wins. Jesus says: move on!

The message is that we will have to resist the very temptation described here....that is, to ascribe these violent tendencies only to those on “the other side.” It is easy to see these baser impulses in the other, those whom we already judge as wrong. Instead, we need God’s help to see the insidious nature of these impulses in ourselves and our own worldview. Otherwise, the finger-pointing will continue...the never-ending real religion of both the political left and right in our time. They are already cursed....as Jesus says, they have their reward.

Next, Jesus details further demands upon his followers. When his disciples want to finger-point, Jesus instead requires them to examine their own life commitments, calling all who follow him to order their priorities so that their lives are radically free to follow him. OK, back to the interview.

In verses 57 through 62, Jesus is interviewing candidates for discipleship. One candidate asks permission to return home and bury his father, who may be dead already. But, maybe, the candidate wants to put off discipleship until he has seen his father through old age and into the cemetery. In any case, Jesus does not give permission, because discipleship has priority. There is somebody else to care for this father, and somebody else to bury him. The one invited to discipleship must follow.

The next makes a similar, but less dramatic appeal: "Let me first say farewell to those at my home." Here again, Jesus gives a thumbs-down. This person also needs to hit the discipleship road, and do so immediately.

What Jesus says at this point does not make sense: "No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God." But think on it this way...when an animal is pulling a plow, the farmer must focus on a fixed point ahead in order to plow a straight line. Looking back when plowing causes the farmer to swerve, resulting in a crooked furrow, the mark of an amateur...and the crooked furrow sits there all season, making the farmer look foolish. To look back is a waste of time, as opposed to concentration on what lies ahead. Who here has unlimited time ahead? I certainly do not.

Jesus respects marriage, speaks out against divorce, pays attention to children. He honors the family, but he does not make an idol out of it. For him, family arrangements stand or fall on whether they promote or hinder discipleship. So, when we are tempted to focus on how right we are and how wrong others are, pause and pay attention to this impulse as a red flag. The impulse to attack tells us that, according to Jesus, we must do a full 180-degree pivot, turning our gaze from "the other" to examining ourselves instead. We must ask: What am I attached to today that keeps me from following Jesus fully and freely?

It does not matter who we are. It is easy to come up with excuses. Some sound highly moral, but what we call love and duty are sometimes what Jesus knows to be the voice of addiction speaking, our fear of a different future, our refusal to die that we may live. We may not want to stop our slavery to possessions. If we stop, we may end up thankful to God for simple gifts...and then we may want God more than the stuff we have. It can unsettle us to follow Christ in a consumer culture.

We may not want to stop our worship of our family. After all, if we stop, we may recognize members of our family as people in their own right, living lives outside our own. Loving people, we hope...but, at the heart of it all...just as broken and imperfect as you and I are. If we stop our worship of who we think they are, then we may struggle to love them for who, in fact, they really are. It is unsettling to follow Christ in a culture that debases the family and yet puts it on a pedestal.

Finally, when one candidate for discipleship pipes up and declares: "I will follow you wherever you go," his answer is uncertain. Jesus does not accept or reject him, but rather advises him...talking in a funny way about accommodations. Wild animals have their places to stay, but Jesus does not. Jesus talks about accommodations because he believes this candidate will not follow Jesus just anywhere, but rather he will follow Jesus wherever this candidate wants to go. Someplace with comfortable accommodations. He and Jesus are not following the same road...as Jesus goes where his father wants him to go.

Today, we have talked about excuses in place of discipleship. Most of us, when Jesus calls, pull out one excuse or another...or do not even answer the phone when he calls. The never-ending grace of God...the eternal love of God for us...is that, still, Jesus always keeps calling us...waiting for our souls to answer. What makes people faithful is not utter freedom from excuse-making, complete deliverance from addiction to our own sense of self-control, but instead the lively realization that God remains bigger than whatever we put in God's place, and that Jesus keeps inviting us to discipleship is a voice louder and sweeter and more insistent than our excuses. It is all very convincing to us, but very lame to God.

All this in the Name of the God who works all the time with us, waiting for us, because, here on earth, there is really nobody else to work with other than the Father, and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

Amen.