

Fifth Sunday After Pentecost, Year C

June 27, 2010

1 Kings 19: 15-16, 19-21; Psalm 16; Galatians 5: 1, 13-25; Luke 9: 51-62

1 Kings 19:15-16, 19-21

{15} Then the LORD said to him, "Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus; when you arrive, you shall anoint Hazael as king over Aram. *{16}* Also you shall anoint Jehu son of Nimshi as king over Israel; and you shall anoint Elisha son of Shaphat of Abel-meholah as prophet in your place.... *{19}* So he set out from there, and found Elisha son of Shaphat, who was plowing. There were twelve yoke of oxen ahead of him, and he was with the twelfth. Elijah passed by him and threw his mantle over him. *{20}* He left the oxen, ran after Elijah, and said, "Let me kiss my father and my mother, and then I will follow you." Then Elijah said to him, "Go back again; for what have I done to you?" *{21}* He returned from following him, took the yoke of oxen, and slaughtered them; using the equipment from the oxen, he boiled their flesh, and gave it to the people, and they ate. Then he set out and followed Elijah, and became his servant.

Psalm 16

{1} Protect me, O God, for in you I take refuge. *{2}* I say to the LORD, "You are my Lord; I have no good apart from you." *{3}* As for the holy ones in the land, they are the noble, in whom is all my delight. *{4}* Those who choose another god multiply their sorrows; their drink offerings of blood I will not pour out or take their names upon my lips. *{5}* The LORD is my chosen portion and my cup; you hold my lot. *{6}* The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places; I have a goodly heritage. *{7}* I bless the LORD who gives me counsel; in the night also my heart instructs me. *{8}* I keep the LORD always before me; because he is at my right hand, I shall not be moved. *{9}* Therefore my heart is glad, and my soul rejoices; my body also rests secure. *{10}* For you do not give me up to Sheol, or let your faithful one see the Pit. *{11}* You show me the path of life. In your presence there is fullness of joy; in your right hand are pleasures forevermore.

Galatians 5:1, 13-25

{1} For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.... *{13}* For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another. *{14}* For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." *{15}* If, however, you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another. *{16}* Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. *{17}* For what the flesh desires is opposed to the Spirit, and what the Spirit desires is opposed to the flesh; for these are opposed to each other, to prevent you from doing what you want. *{18}* But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not subject to the law. *{19}* Now the works of the flesh are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, *{20}* idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, *{21}* envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these. I am warning you, as I warned you before: those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. *{22}* By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, *{23}* gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things. *{24}* And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. *{25}* If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit.

Luke 9:51-62

{51} When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem. *{52}* And he sent messengers ahead of him. On their way they entered a village of the Samaritans to make ready for him; *{53}* but they did not receive him, because his face was set toward Jerusalem. *{54}* When his disciples James and John saw it, they said, "Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?" *{55}* But he turned and rebuked them. *{56}* Then they went on to another village. *{57}* As they were going along the road, someone said to him, "I will follow you wherever you go." *{58}* And Jesus said to him, "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." *{59}* To another he said, "Follow me." But he said, "Lord, first let me go and bury my father." *{60}* But Jesus said to him, "Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God." *{61}* Another said, "I will follow you, Lord; but let me first say farewell to those at my home." *{62}* Jesus said to him, "No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God."

With all of the potential choice of topics for a sermon on any given week, I'm sometimes surprised where I wind up. Such is the case today.

I have a confession to make. This past Memorial Day I came across the MTV "reality" series by the name of *Jersey Shore* and, much as I can't believe it myself, I'm hooked. To be honest, this is trash TV at its best and humanity at its worst, but the show has become an unlikely hit and has quite a few fans.

Let me explain. There are a few reasons for my unlikely fascination. First, I love the whole beach and boardwalk thing. Second, New Jersey Italian-American culture is apparently one of the last strongholds for the pure New York (or Brooklyn) accent. Music to my ears. Third, these are the folks I grew up with. They were my friends, neighbors, classmates, etc. Like it or not, whether or not I ever did or ever will fit in, these are my people.

Before going any further, for those of you fortunate enough to not have any idea of what I'm talking about, allow me a brief description.

Eight "twenty somethings" of Italian-American heritage, four men and four women (the popular slang terms are "guidos" and "guidettes"), spend the summer living together in a pretty nice beach house. Although they must work at a tee shirt store on the boardwalk in exchange for the accommodations, it seems that the vast majority of their time is spent in relentless partying, "hooking up", gossip, backbiting, fist fighting (with other folks at the clubs), sleeping well into the daytime hours, etc. All as the TV audience looks in.

I'm sure, being television and all, these folks were chosen because each one is a bit of a character and each one is a strange mix of some real charm as well as some really bad stuff. Anyway, I've resurrected a word that I haven't used much in a long time: "hedonists". I know it's a loaded term and a bit on the judgmental side, but I think it is accurate. My old dictionary at home offers this definition: "pleasure seeking as a way of life."

"Now the works of the flesh are obvious..." So said St. Paul. He then went on to give that really cool list: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing. With the exception of "sorcery", that's just one episode of the show, in fact, with minor variation; it seems to determine the weekly plot. So, the cast members of *Jersey Shore* are poster children for the "works of the flesh", at least as they appear on that list.

It occurs to me, however, that these are *exactly* the folks Jesus liked to hang out with. He even called a few to be apostles and disciples. I'm not really sure what to do with that and what the implications might be for my own ministry as well as that of Christians in general. So, perhaps St. Paul ("I am warning you, as I warned you before: those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God."), once again, is being a bit more severe than Jesus might have been.

It is interesting that almost all of us hear the words "the flesh" and think primarily about sex and about individual behavior. It turns out that St. Paul was not addressing individuals, but a community in peril of becoming fractured. So, "the flesh" has a communal dimension to it as well. I consider something I found in one of the commentaries to be a good definition: "the flesh" asserts itself anywhere that self seeking human desire opposes itself to the divine will and the wholeness of the community."

So, another obvious "work of the flesh" is an oil company cutting corners in order to maximize profits and being responsible for one of the worst environmental disasters in our history. It turns out the "the flesh" has as much to do with the Gulf Coast as it does with the Jersey Shore. "The flesh" is also evident anytime greed, self interest, or profit are placed over human well-being. That means "the flesh" is alive and thriving from Wall Street to the halls of political power.

Finally, with all due respect to St. Paul, I just don't experience things quite as clearly cut as he describes. I think I understand the theological point he is trying to make, but he might have overstated a bit (as he did some times). Life frequently is a lot more complicated, messy, and murky than today's reading would have us believe.

Verse 16 in the second reading begins with the word "Live" (Live by the Spirit, I say...). Another, perhaps even better translation for that Greek word (*peripateite*) is "walk" or "walk around". That sentence would then read: "Walk (or walk around) by the Spirit..."

Well, the walk is seldom clear-cut or direct. Sometimes we stumble and fall. Sometimes we take a few detours along the way or even back track a bit. Sometimes we "stall". The "works of the flesh" aren't always that obvious and even when they are, that's the direction I want to head in.

Here's where I break (yet again) one of the rules for good preaching by introducing another text. It's from the *Letter to the Hebrews* and happens to be among my favorites. A good way to conclude. "For we do not have a

high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.” (Hebrews 4: 15-16)

All of us, in varying degrees and in different ways, live out our own version of the *Jersey Shore*. All of us dip our toes into that ocean. But, the real and only water that matters is the water of Baptism and the promise and assurance it holds for us each and every day of the journey.

AMEN.