

DON'T LOOK BACK

*A sermon preached by the Reverend Anne Gavin Ritchie on June 27, 2010,
the Fifth Sunday after Pentecost, based on I Kings 19:15-16, 19-21 and St. Luke 9:51-62.*

Not every disciple responds to the call as wholeheartedly as Elisha, eager to succeed his mentor Elijah. Certainly not the fellows appearing to Jesus along the road. No wonder Jesus did not accept their “reasons” – or rather, excuses – for not following immediately. Jesus goes on to say, “No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.”

That’s a pretty serious statement. There is no ambiguity. Other warnings such as “don’t touch a hot stove” come to mind. Jesus’ saying is meant to be as strong as it sounds. What Jesus means is “You’re with us or you’re not.” “You’re aligned with God, or you’re not.” “You’re living your life well, or you’re not.” Harsh words, but true.

If you were a farmer in 1st-century Palestine, being pulled by two yoked oxen along a field, if you didn’t take care to guide the plow straight ahead, it would go every which-way, all over the field. Your planting of seeds would be disrupted, and so would the harvest. You’d be forced to waste precious time compensating for the mess.

In Luke’s passage, Jesus brilliantly likens the plowing process to how we live everyday life. Are we plowing a straight field? Or are we moving in too many directions at the same time? What are we losing in the process?

One of the chief issues in “looking back” is the problem of forgiveness. Many of us are so caught up in bitterness over the past that we simply cannot move on.

Yesterday I happened upon a PBS television program focusing on the components of both human happiness and resilience. I didn’t see it all, but I discovered it was part of a three-part series called “This Emotional Life.” The point being made that our being content is less about external circumstances than how we respond to them.

I saw the story of one man struggling with this thorny issue of forgiveness. He had been attending a wedding reception in New Orleans, standing on a balcony, when it gave way. The first man to topple over grabbed whatever he could on his way down, thirty feet to the sidewalk. This man – let’s call him Jim – was the first thing he grabbed.

Jim, like the man who grabbed him, was seriously injured. In the TV interview it looked like he never recovered full physical strength. But the main thing that crippled him was his inability to forgive. He simply could *not* let go of the thought of the negligence of the owner of the building with that faulty balcony. He hated him. (I’m not sure if there was a law suit – can’t imagine there wasn’t – but whatever the outcome, Jim did not feel settled.) He remained full of bitterness and hate.

After years of internal anguish, Jim knew he needed help. He signed up for a seminar on forgiveness. He almost walked out after the second session. He just couldn’t abide the idea of even trying to forgive the person whose negligence had caused him so much pain and suffering.

But then, after completing some of the forgiveness “exercises” the leader introduced, Jim began to just... feel better. He spoke, tears rolling from his eyes, of finally having his life back. NOT – like BP’s Tony Hayward, who wanted his life back to race his yacht and enjoy other privileged pleasures – but rather as a way to live being grateful, once again, for the simple joys of every day. Through the grace of God and his own wise choices, Jim managed to accomplish just that.

Another feature of the program was Bob, who suffered through *eight years* as a prisoner of war in Vietnam. In the interview he said that, having a rope bind his head down to his feet, being tightened every day, anyone would have given up their grandmother!

But the really amazing thing is how he chose to use his time in solitary confinement. First he essentially “built” a large house in his mind, with every foundation, wall and individual brick and nail set in place. He decided he would build the house of his dreams for his wife and family, if only in his head. So he went ahead and designed a first plan. After that was complete, he wondered how it would work if he moved a fireplace from one side of the house to the other. *That* change of plans required several years more of mental work.

While Bob was building his mental house, he also participated in constructing a tapping code through which he and the other American prisoners could communicate. My son Gavin, who has been studying at the Fort Bragg Special Operations John F. Kennedy Center, tells me that the tapping code is still taught. The code puts the letters of the alphabet into a cube, five letters across, five letters down. By tapping they could communicate and go on to devise some amazing programs. Like teaching each other French; or how to put on an addition to a house.

When Bob was asked if, had he the power to erase this eight-year experience from his life, would he do so, Bob emphatically said, “No!” “I learned so much about myself, about choices I can make, from those eight years. I’d *never* have them taken away.” By the way, Bob *did* eventually build the house he designed in solitary confinement.

Bob and his prisoner companions really *used* the time they had, even under excruciating conditions. He and they used time creatively, gratefully, in community, and what they learned will stay with them the rest of their lives.

How are *we* using our time? Are we looking back, at all our regrets? Are we living our lives focusing on what we never were given? Not enough attention, not enough love?

Or do we remember our difficulties, but refused to be confined by them? Like Jim, who found peace in finally being able to forgive. Like Bob, who took eight years of horrible imprisonment and made it a time of discovery and connection.

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God does not call us to look back on our life with bitterness and regret. God calls us to move forward, looking ahead to claim our future.