

Homily for June 27, 2010 (13<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time, C)  
*1 Kings 19:16b, 19-21; Galatians 5:1, 13-18; Luke 9:51-62*

Detachment, Doggedness and Determination

As I began writing this homily in Detroit, our city was preparing to welcome over 10,000 people for the US Social Forum. According to a newspaper report, organizers described the gathering as a “movement building process...the next most important step in our struggle to build a powerful multiracial, multi-sectoral, inter-generational, diverse, inclusive, internationalist movement that transforms this country and changes history.” The more that I reflected on this description, the more uncomfortable I became.

After a few moments, the source of my discomfort seized me: “Isn’t this what *the Church* is supposed to be?” I asked myself. Perhaps not totally, and certainly not in the same way, but the Church itself is called to be a diverse-and-united (i.e., Catholic) agent of transforming not merely our own nation and society but the entire world. As the Second Vatican Council proclaimed in *Gaudium et Spes*, the Pastoral Constitution of the Church in the Modern World (40):

*Pursuing the saving purpose which is proper to her, the Church does not only communicate divine life to men but in some way casts the reflected light of that life over the entire earth, most of all by its healing and elevating impact on the dignity of the person, by the way in which it strengthens the seams of human society and imbues the everyday activity of men with a deeper meaning and importance. Thus through her individual members and her whole community, the Church believes she can contribute greatly toward making the family of man and its history more human.*

Our scripture readings on this Thirteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time call us to be disciples who, by our own personal witness and growth in holiness as well as our diverse gifts and ministries, fulfill this mission of transformation—not according to any particular secular or political agenda but instead according to the gospel. It is not a mission that we should assume lightly, for it requires detachment, doggedness, and dedication.

In our first reading, we read of Elisha’s radical detachment in response to receiving the call to succeed Elijah in his prophetic ministry. This call was symbolized by Elijah throwing his cloak over Elisha and is the origin of the phrase, “passing the mantle,” which refers to the transfer of power or office from one person to another.

Elisha’s initial response was conditional, asking at least the opportunity to say good-bye to his parents. But Elijah’s rhetorical response—“Go back! Have I done anything to you?”—dared Elisha to make a radical choice for the ministry

that had been handed on to him, and he did. He not only left his business behind, he destroyed it! It is harder to turn back when there is nothing left to which one can return.

St. Paul called a young church in Galatia to doggedness in sustaining their commitment to the gospel that he preached and the freedom that they had been given through the grace of God. He found them resubmitting themselves to “the yoke of slavery,” that is the Law of Moses and more specifically circumcision.

For Paul, this was a trap. “Once again,” he wrote to them, “I declare to every man who has himself circumcised that he is bound to observe the entire law. You are separated from Christ, you who are trying to be justified by the law; you have fallen from grace” (Galatians 5:3-4). Because it was impossible to fulfill all the stipulations of the law, Paul reasoned, anyone who placed themselves under it was simultaneously yoking themselves to a lifetime of futility and a future with no salvation. They could not save themselves. Only God could save them; but paradoxically in that dependence there was true freedom.

This is the freedom that we have all been given through baptism. With this freedom, however, there is also responsibility. Paul warns us, as he warned the Galatians, to “not use this freedom as an opportunity for the flesh [the Greek, *sarx*, i.e., our human tendency toward self-indulgence, self-aggrandizement, and selfishness]; rather, serve one another through love.” Love and service are both the means and the manifestations of the holiness to which we are all called as individual believers and as a Church.

It is this loving service that Jesus embodied in his own dedication to the mission that the Father had given him. Today’s gospel passage from Luke 9 follows his first two predictions of his death (vv. 22, 43-45); his explanation of the conditions of discipleship (vv. 23-27); his Transfiguration (vv. 28-36); a manifestation of his power over the forces of evil (vv. 37-43); and his redefinition of greatness (vv. 46-48).

Near the peak of his own power and popularity, Jesus nonetheless “resolutely determined to journey to Jerusalem,” where his mission would be fulfilled not on a throne but on a cross. He wouldn’t allow himself to be distracted, not even by the slights of some Samaritans, and he prepared his disciples to do the same, refusing their calls for vengeance on their religious and ethnic rivals and calling them to be ready for a life of discomfort and to cut even family ties to follow him, if those proved to be an obstacle.

That is a “hard word” for us to hear, but it is no less real. The life of a disciple of Christ is filled with graces and blessings; but we fool ourselves if we think it will not be without trials. Once we put our hands to the plow, Jesus admonishes us, we had better be ready to heed the words of the old Spiritual and civil rights anthem: “Keep your eyes on the prize, hold on, hold on!” +