

5th Sunday of Pentecost July 1, 2007
1 Kings 19:15-16, 19-21
Galatians 5:1, 13-25
Luke 9:51-62

St. Paul's Red Wing
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The Bible is full of contradictions. An awful lot of people out there give the impression that life would be simpler and better if we would just get back to the Bible and live like the Bible says. That is a lot more complicated than it sounds. The Bible is full of contradictions.

Just finished reading a novel called The Brothers K by David Duncan. Chapter three begins with a list of Biblical contradictions.

Gal. 6 -	Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.
Gal. 6 -	Everyone shall bear his own burden.
Mark 7 -	Honor your father and your mother
Matthew 11 -	and call no man your father upon the earth
Matthew 5 -	Love your neighbor as yourself
Matthew 8 & Luke 9 -	Let the dead bury the dead
John 14 -	Peace I leave with you, my peace I give to you
Matthew 10 -	Think not that I have come to send peace
Mark 9 -	Lord, I believe
Mark 9 -	Help my unbelief

Our lessons today present similar contradictions. The story of First Kings tells of the calling of Elisha. Elijah, the prophet, is burned out. Scared. Depressed. He is unable to see God's power at work with him. So God sends Elijah out to commission Elisha who will be an assistant for a short while and then will take on the responsibility of being God's mouth piece, God's voice. He will be the prophet.

Elisha says, "I will follow you, but first let me go and say goodbye." Elijah's response is obscure. "What have I to do with you?" It is either a rebuke or permission. Nevertheless, Elijah goes back to his farm and

community. Not only does he say goodbye, but he burns his bridges, literally. He burns the yoke for his oxen, slaughters the oxen and holds a farewell BBQ with them for the whole neighborhood. There is no way he can go back to his former life of plowing and farming after he has done that. Very publicly and very dramatically, he brings his old life to a close, declares that his past is over, and he is moving on.

Turn to the story in Luke. Someone says, "I will follow you, Jesus." Jesus does not say, "Great, get on board!" Rather, he gives something of a warning. "Foxes have holes; birds have nests; we got nothing. We're on the road, at the whim of strangers who may or may not receive us, and we just came from a village that did not receive us. It made the disciples so mad they were ready to call down the wrath of God and burn the place down. That is what following me means".

We do not know whether the enthusiastic person in the crowd followed anyway, or whether that person turned back with cold water thrown all over his or her hopes and expectations. We do know Jesus did not jump up and say, "Great, let's go. Won't this be fun?"

To other couple of people he said, "Follow me." One just wants to honor his father, like the Bible tells us, burying him, which for a devote Jew means sitting 10 days of Shiva. Jesus is not sympathetic at all. The other guy says almost word for word what Elisha had said, "Just let me say goodbye." Maybe he has oxen to burn and an old life to put to rest. But Jesus nays, "No. There is no looking back, even to say goodbye."

Well, it seems a bit harsh, and it surely is confusing. So, there is one set of contradictions. Then move to Galatians.

Now in defense of this text, there are verses that get skipped for the sake of brevity in our worship service. Verse one of chapter 5 – Do not submit to the yoke of slavers. Skip eleven verses – Through love become slaves to one another. What is a person to think?

This Galatians problem is the easiest to consider, so we'll do that first. Paul is writing about two different things, and that is hard to get when quoting just a few verses. In the first verse, he is referring to the

issue of circumcision. The big questions were: Did you have to be circumcised and become a Jew first before becoming a Christian and following Jesus? Did Gentiles (like you and me) have to enter into the covenant of Abraham (and circumcision was the great and ancient symbol of the covenant) before they could enter into the covenant God has continued through Jesus.

Paul is saying Christ has set us free from slavery to the past, to old forms, but eleven verses later, we are called to a new relationship. We are freed to enter into slavery to each other. Some translations will say as servants to one another, but it is the same Greek word as the one used earlier, and "slaves" points out the dramatic turn.

But it still is confusing. How in the world do we know where to go, who to follow? How do I know when I am serving the right thing, making the right choice? It is a question of discernment. One person can say goodbye and the next cannot. Don't be a slave here, but be a slave to this. But how do I know when I have fallen into a trap and gotten stuck in the past or the old ways? How do I know when God is calling me to something new?

Late June 1983, sitting in a rural parish in the middle of nowhere, kind of the wilderness, also know as the southwestern corner of Iowa, I was finishing up my internship. I was looking for a call, looking for a job. I was kind of thinking I wanted to start out in a small place on my own. The Bishop wanted to put my name as an associate into a larger church. There were the texts for the weekend when I was to meet with that church and give a short devotion. These texts and their confusion and contradictions are etched in tom my brain. How to decide? How to discern? Twenty-four years later, I still am not sure I have any better idea.

Here's an easy answer. Let love be your guide, Great, except love is messy. Love is hard work. Jesus is right to warn anyone with a glib answer. Be careful of your expectations. Following Jesus will lead you to dangerous places.

We have young people from our congregation following this week. They are going where there is poverty and sorrow, where there have been shootings in school. Prejudice. Decades of misunderstand and strained relationships between the dominant culture and the community. They are going.

When they come back, they will be changed. This trip may change how they relate to the Native American population in our community, in our schools. May change how they think about themselves and about God.

The last mission trip I went on, we worked in 100 degree weather everyday, and got one shower during the week. Every kid in our group was ready to do it again. (Of course, kids are nuts.)

Love may grab hold of you. God's love may grab hold of you and take you where you have not planned to go. And where will that be? Who knows?

There is no simple answer. There is no single answer. But God WILL go with you. God will lead and guide you. You might make the wrong choice. Maybe you will mistake God's call – so God will nudge you in a new direction.

In 1983, I took that call to be an associate pastor. It was a great church. I learned a lot. It was not a good fit between me and the senior pastor, and I stayed less than two years. But I found a husband, someone who supported me through that turmoil, and I decided that hunch in the back of my mind, that feeling in my gut that I wanted to serve a little church by myself, really was a call from God and that's where I went the next time.

The good news is that our ability to discern God's call correctly is NOT the most important factor in this equation. We are all going to make mistakes. The disciples did. Elijah did. It happens. The most important factor is the steadfast love of God which will not let go of you along the journey. As you discern that love leading you, you will be enslaved by the love of God. As contradictory as this sounds; love will set you free. Amen.