

Thankful Memorial, Chattanooga
June 22, 2022
Year C, 3 Pentecost, Proper 8
To Follow Jesus
The Rev. Leyla King

2 Kings 2:1-2, 6-14
Psalm 77:1-2, 11-20
Galatians 5:1, 13-25
Luke 9:51-62

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

In the portion of Luke's Gospel we just heard, lots of people are talking about following Jesus. One person tells him, "I will follow you wherever you go;" to another, Jesus says, simply, "Follow me;" the third says, "I will follow you, Lord." But in each case the instinct to follow Jesus is overwhelmed by the fact that doing so seems just too hard.

Perhaps you have seen before the meme – that combination of picture and pithy text that on social media – that shows a young man with a backpack and a phone on a bench. Beside him is Jesus – white robe, sandals and all – who says to the man: "No, I'm not talking about Twitter; I literally want you to follow me."

Now I like a good pun – or even a bad one. And I get a chuckle out the joke that plays off the meaning of "follow" – in a Twitter feed *and* in so many parts of the gospels like this one in Luke. At the very least, it makes us think twice about what it means to "follow" Jesus. Jesus invites folks to come with him on the way that he is going. But I wonder if there are even more ways that we might define this idea of following.

What if we consider following Jesus in the sense of coming after him in his work or position. This kind of following implies a taking on of a role after someone else has had it. We say, for example, that Queen Mary followed King Henry in the Tudor monarchy. Or, George Washington was followed by John Adams as U.S. President. Or Elisha followed Elijah as head prophet in ancient Israel.

Although, in that last example, Elisha follows Elijah in all senses of the term – except the Twitter one, of course. Elisha has been literally following Elijah around for some time now. He has been acting as Elijah's servant and learning from him as his disciple. And in this portion of second Kings, we hear how Elisha also follows Elijah in terms of the position and authority that gets passed down from one to another.

In this final goodbye between teacher and student, master and servant, father-figure and son, Elisha asks for and receives from God a double-portion of Elijah's spirit – an inheritance, you might say, given to Elijah first and then passed down to his heir. And when Elisha takes up Elijah's mantle, he takes up his work, too. Elijah has been a great prophet, challenging the power of corrupt King Ahab and his sons, reminding the people of ancient Israel of the vision and hope God has for them. And now, Elisha must take up that work as he follows Elijah as the next great prophet.

But, Elisha's not so sure he's up for it, really. We missed it in the text we heard a few minutes ago, but in the verses that got left out of this reading, Elijah and Elisha stop on their journey a couple of times and each time the chorus of other, lesser prophets that follow them around, says to Elisha, "Do you know that today the Lord will take your master away from you?" And each time, Elisha

answers, “Yes I know; be silent.” We might rephrase that exchange as something along the lines of, *Elisha, don’t you know today you will have to say goodbye to your mentor and then try to fill his shoes?* And Elisha replies, *Ack! I know! Stop talking about it!* And then, even at the end, as Elijah is being taken, Elisha cries out with a combination of sadness and really bad nerves, “Father, father!” After that, he tests out his new powers as he strikes the river and asks, “Where is the Lord, the God of Elijah?” Elisha must be wondering if he can really do this? Does he have what it takes?

And the answer is, he does. Or maybe better, not that he *has* what it takes, but that he is given what is needed: Elijah’s mantle, a double-portion of his spirit, the authority and the vision of a great prophet. By the grace of God, Elisha ends up following Elijah in every way imaginable.

So, too, with us who *follow* Jesus.

Now, I’m not suggesting that we think of ourselves as being Christ himself, God’s gift to the world. Or at least not quite. Christ’s death and resurrection was salvific – it redeemed the whole world in a once-for-all-time kind of way. But, the work that Jesus of Nazareth did *before* his crucifixion *also* had some salvific qualities to it inasmuch as Jesus’ ministry was about restoring things to their rightful and true existence: healing broken bodies and broken relationships, lifting up the lowly, challenging the corrupt power of the mighty.

And while none of us is *the* Son of God, *the* Messiah, we are all of us sons and daughters of the same God who is Father to Christ Jesus; each of us is called to and can do the work that Jesus did before his death – and after his resurrection. We can each be *little* Messiahs. We can each take up the mantle of Christ Jesus and follow him in the work of restoring and reconciling our little pieces of the world to God.

And if that seems like too big of a job, like sandals that are impossible to fill – well, we’re in good company. Elisha felt that way, we know, as have many other men and women of God before us. But the good news is this: God has already provided us with everything we need to follow Jesus in his ministry.

It’s called grace. It is a free gift that pours into us from God’s Spirit. So, we don’t have to measure up to anything—it’s not a competition and we don’t receive this reward only if we succeed. “For freedom Christ has set us free,” says Paul to the Galatians. All we need do is let ourselves be set free in the Spirit and the Spirit working in us will produce Her own fruit in our lives: “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.” These are the characteristics of one who is free in God’s Spirit, the fruit that allows us to follow Jesus in his mission. Clothed in the Spirit, like a mantle handed on to us as our inheritance through the Son, we can and will carry on in God’s work in the world, following Jesus. Amen.