

## *Luke and AAA: Preaching to Fellow Travelers in June, July, and August*

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I know that it didn't happen exactly this way, but, in my mind's eye, I imagine how it might have looked as Jesus and the disciples set off on the journey to Jerusalem.

There Jesus was, sweating away as he stuffed the disciples' sleeping bags into the cartop carrier. There the disciples were, shifting about in excited clumps, chattering noisily about the places they would go and the things they would see in Jerusalem. There Jesus was, inserting the latest recording of *Messiah* into the CD player to waft its majestic strains as the miles slipped by. There the disciples were, rolling their eyes and waving their favorite Jonah and the Blowfish disc. There Jesus was, settling into the driver's seat, gripping the steering wheel, and "setting his face to go to Jerusalem" (Luke 9:51). There the disciples were, fifteen minutes into the trip, when Peter belts out the first line of the centuries-old travel chorus, "How long before we get there?" and Andrew chimes in with "I've got to go to the bathroom."

Scenes like this will be occurring among the members of every congregation at the same time their preachers unfold the summer lectionary road map, an itinerary which traces a section of Jesus' journey to Jerusalem as described by Luke in Luke 9:51-14:14. At the same time that parishioners are hitting the road to get away from it all, Jesus and the disciples are moving toward it all, that is, toward the challenge, resistance, pain, and death that Jerusalem represents.

Jesus' journey to Jerusalem isn't vacation; it's real life. However, if, as Sharon Ringe notes, Luke's version of the journey is designed "to prepare the church to continue the ministry of Jesus after the events of his passion and resurrection"<sup>1</sup> then his travel narrative provides much for the preacher to ponder and to preach to Christians who struggle and strive to live "real life" faithfully amid the comings and goings of summer.

### *Luke 10:25-37; Luke 10:38-4: Mission Trips and Silent Retreats*

You can know the Bible inside and out, but still miss the point.

Take the lawyer who approaches Jesus, for example. He has devoted his life to knowing the Bible inside and out. And it's not like he's one of those kids that you used to run into back in my childhood, the kind who would wear his Sunday school perfect attendance pin to school. The middle-aged and Baptists among you remember how those pins looked: a big gold pin for the first year's

perfect attendance, then a rectangular bar for the second year's perfect attendance that hooked onto the first, and a third one that hooked onto the second until the pin got so long that it practically dragged the floor when its oh-so-religiously-superior wearer strutted to his desk.

The text doesn't indicate that this lawyer was some kind of pious show-off like that. I think he just really, truly loved the Bible, that there was nothing he loved to do more when he was a kid than spread his scrolls out on his bedroom floor and read them and think about them until his mother poked a worried face through the bedroom door and suggested that wouldn't it be a good idea for him to take a break and go outside to play with his friends for awhile.

Knowing the Bible inside and out was this lawyer's life, his passion. And satisfying a ravenous hunger for God that roared like a starving lion inside of him—that must have been a part of it, too. Otherwise, why would he have been tagging along with Jesus asking questions like, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?"

The lawyer knew the Bible inside and out; of that, there can be no doubt. Jesus himself gave the lawyer a 100 on his biblical pop quiz. "What is written in the law? What do you read there?" "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself." "You have given the right answer," said Jesus. A-plus.

The lawyer knew the Bible inside and out, but Jesus knew that he was in danger of missing the point. So when the lawyer asked, "And who is my neighbor?" Jesus told him the story about the Good Samaritan, transposing masterfully an abstract law into concrete reality. It's the greatest story in the world for summer preaching, for it affords the preacher ample opportunity to focus listeners' attentions outward to the world, affirming the truth that every person is a neighbor, emphasizing the way Jesus calls disciples to selfless regard for the welfare of every person in God's human family. The Sunday that Luke 10:25-37 appears in the lectionary is a Sunday for highlighting mission trips and food pantries and domestic violence programs and all the other ministries of the church that are devoted to bandaging the wounds of those who are hurting.

Yet Luke, chronicler of the scene, seems to sense that something is missing. He seems to mutter to himself, "In the parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus has told us what it means to love one's neighbor, but what about the first part of the law, the part about loving God with all one's heart, soul, mind, and strength? Surely I can think of something Jesus said, something he did, that will get across to the reader the first part of the law the way that the parable of the Good Samaritan illustrated the second part."

Luke's snap of the finger, his "by George, I think I've got it," is Luke 10:38-42. The text is not an easy one to preach. Often when it is read, there are a lot of

people, especially women, who experience the story of Jesus' visit to the home of Mary and Martha as a slap in the face. The story hurts as they experience Jesus' words to the hardworking Martha as a denigration of their own hard work and service, a put-down that sounds suspiciously similar to other put-downs that have been slung in their faces by men, by other women, by the culture, even by the church.

The other problem is that when Luke 10: 38-42 is read apart from Luke 10:25-37 (as the Year C lectionary suggests), preachers are prompted to shine a homiletic penlight on this tiny encounter in Jesus' life and lured into suggesting in their sermons, however subtly, that Christians are to be super-spiritualists (like Mary), not activists (like Martha).

In truth, though, what Luke does is to maneuver into place not a penlight, but, rather, a huge stage spotlight, in order to illuminate the much larger scene of Luke 10:25-42. From stage right, the Good Samaritan steps out on stage to show disciples what it is to love one's neighbor. And from stage left, Mary pokes her head onstage into the pool of light to show what it is to love God with all one's heart, soul, mind, and strength.

Disciples then are called by the text both to mission trips and silent retreats. A simultaneous emphasis on Luke 10:25-37 and 10:38-42 challenges the larger temptation for contemporary disciples: the temptation of distraction.

Distraction for modern-day disciples happens in countless ways. There are the personal distractions of getting the kids to soccer practice and yourself to work, not to mention managing a household and mixing in volunteer responsibilities, the result of which is the off-center life that we long for a summer respite to restore to centeredness. There is the cultural distraction of materialism and consumerism that assaults American Christians at every turn. And during the summer when Presbyterians, Methodists, Episcopalians, Baptists, and all the rest convene to debate important issues in their huge ecclesiastical assemblies, churches can find themselves distracted as Martha was distracted. Caught up in what are extremely important matters, as Martha was caught up in the extremely important task of getting food on the table and extending hospitality to Jesus, we find it's easy to let the clatter of our ecclesiastical pots and pans drown out what Jesus is straining his voice to say to us.

Kathleen Norris conducts an exercise using noise and silence when she is an artist-in-residence in elementary schools. "I'll make a deal with you," she says to the class, "first you get to make noise, and then you get to make silence."

The rule for noise is simple: when she raises her hand, she tells them, "you make all the noise you can while sitting at your desk, using your mouth, hands, and feet. The important thing is that when I lower my hand, you have to stop."

Norris writes, "I found that we'd usually have to make two or three attempts to attain an acceptable din—shouting, pounding, stomping. The wonder is, we

never got caught. Maybe because the roar lasted for just a few seconds and school principals assumed that they'd imagined the whole thing."

The rule for silence is equally simple: breathe normally but quietly.

Some kids loved it. "Let's do it again," they'd say. Others weren't so sure. "It's scary," a fifth grader complained. "Why?" Kathleen Norris asked, and then says that he got to the heart of it when he replied, "It's like we're waiting for something—it's scary." Norris concludes:

What interests me most about my experiment is the way in which making silence liberated the imagination of so many children. Very few wrote with any originality about making noise. Most of their images were clichés such as "we sound like a herd of elephants." But silence was another matter; here, their images often had a depth and maturity that was unlike anything else they wrote....one third grader's poem turned into a prayer: "Silence is spiders spinning their webs, it's like a silkworm making its silk. Lord, help me to know when to be silent."<sup>2</sup>

For distracted disciples, this is the prayer that Mary, sitting at the feet of Jesus, and the Good Samaritan, silently bandaging the wounds of the one on the roadside, invite the church to pray, for it is in risking the scariness of silence that, by God's grace, our imaginations are liberated and we are made able to write the story of our own and the church's future with faithful originality.

In Luke's road map of stories, the summertime preacher will find much to preach to the disciples who find their ways to the pews of his or her congregation. In Luke 11:1-13, one of the disciples voices a request on behalf of every disciple who encounters bumps, potholes, and sometimes vast sinkholes in the journey of life and faith when he says, "Lord, teach us to pray." Luke 12:13-21 is a stopover in which readers are invited to examine the pursuits of their present-day lives from the perspectives of their own deaths. In a season when families leave the light on to welcome visiting relatives, Luke 12: 32-40 calls disciples to be dressed for action, leaving the light on against the fear and cynicism of the present age, confident that the Son of Man, full of joy in our expectation of his arrival, will surely come. And during summer days and weeks when so many families count on vacations to re-stitch frayed familial quilts, Jesus' words in Luke 12: 49-53 indicate how high the stakes are for those who would unfold Jesus' road map and follow it as their own itinerary.

Too soon, however, or perhaps not soon enough, depending on one's perspective, summer draws to a close, and it's back to school. If the preaching in June, July, and August has been faithful, both preacher and congregation will have discovered that they've been in school with Jesus throughout the summer.

They will also have realized that in Jesus' class, the lessons differ greatly from those that the culture teaches.

*Luke 14:1, 7-14: Back to School*

Jockeying for a place at the table started early for me, and I bet that it did for you, too. The table was, in my case, a well-worn, oft-painted table at the front of my first grade classroom. To this table we would come in three reading groups: the Redbirds, the Bluebirds, and the Yellowbirds.

Our teacher never said it, of course, but we with our six-year-old sensibilities knew, the place to be was with the Redbirds. When the Redbirds were called to the table, they rustled their self-important feathers. With preening self-confidence, they settled into their places and opened their reading books with a flourish. After they had finished reading about the exciting exploits of Dick and Jane, they returned to their desks to gloat when the Bluebirds or the Yellowbirds stumbled over words that were "so simple."

We've been well-schooled in this notion that earning a place at the right table is important in this life. The right reading group, first chair in the band, SAT scores in the 1400s, a respectable job.

Well, what's wrong with that? What's wrong with striving to do your best? What's wrong with working hard and achieving success? What's wrong with being valedictorian, starting quarterback, chair of the department, Pulitzer Prize winner, a Redbird?

Perhaps nothing.

From the pulpit where I preach, I look out on an incredible group of talented, achieving people. I have a hunch that some of them were even Redbirds. And it's my job as a pastor to help these talented, achieving people to view their intellects and their talents as extravagant gifts from God and to use them creatively to serve God and neighbor to the fullest extent.

There is something incredibly right about acknowledging the gifts with which God has blessed us and honing those gifts with every fiber of our beings.

Luke 14:1, 7-14 is about something else entirely, however.

The words that Jesus spoke and Luke records here were directed toward those who had already gained their places at the table. Perhaps he spoke to them in this way because he sensed something about folks who live their lives as if the ultimate thing is to jockey for the best place at the right table.

Living life in this way is a tenuous way to live. You may be a Redbird, but you can never be sure that you will always be a Redbird. Things can change. You can lose a job. Your spouse can walk out on you or die. The department can reorganize.

Because gaining a place at the Redbird table is such a tenuous thing, it is also an anxious thing. We worry. We worry about where we stand, what other

people think about us, how we measure up. We worry about being humiliated. We don't leave our anxiety about who we are back in the first grade. We take it with us, wherever we go, always wondering, how am I doing? Always worrying about getting ahead of somebody else. Always hoping to be acceptable to those above us and keeping a safe distance from those we consider to be beneath our station.<sup>3</sup>

Jesus speaks to that worry when he begins, "When you are invited to a wedding banquet..." This opening phrase is a clue. One of the metaphors for the Messiah was "bridegroom," the Kingdom, the "marriage feast." So when Jesus says, "When you are invited to a wedding banquet..." it's like fast-forwarding the videotape to the end of the movie so that you can see out it all turns out. And how it all turns out in the end is that what you think counts now isn't going to count then. All this jockeying for position simply is not going to count.<sup>4</sup>

The world teaches us well that we have to earn our place at the table. But we don't. Our place at the table is already secure, Jesus says.

So come to the table. Come to the table...full professors and first-year students. Come to the table...star athletes and benchwarmers. Come to the table...valedictorians and C students. Come to the table...summertime preachers and vacation travelers. Come to the table...Redbirds, Bluebirds, and Yellowbirds. Come as Christ's guests to the table where no one can earn a place, but where all are invited to take a place. Come to the table and bring nothing except your hunger and thirst for God's love and grace.

### Notes

1. Sharon H. Ringe, *Luke* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1995), 148.
2. Kathleen Norris, *Amazing Grace, A Vocabulary of Faith* (New York: Riverhead, 1998), 16-17.
3. Mark Trotter, "The Sure Sign of Status," *Best Sermons I* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988), 218.
4. Ibid, 220.