Sermon on Pentecost 6, 2016
(Luke 9:51-62 w/ glances at 2 Kings 2 and Galatians 5)

Today’s gospel is like the almost estranged uncle who shows up at your door after many years. As he says hello you pick up wisps of alcohol on his breath; you notice he’s wearing clothing that hasn’t seen the inside of a washing machine in some time.

“Can I stay with you?” he asks. He is family so… “come on in you say with misgiving but also hope.”

In the days that follow you realize that your uncle has come on a mission, not for himself, but for you! Through homespun stories, witty sayings and generous questions he shares not only his own wisdom but opens your own story to him, and to yourself.

This gospel shows up on our doorstep in an unattractive manner but it’s the gospel, it is Jesus so… will we invite him in?

The first verse “When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem.” This text is from chapter 9, just about 60% remains in front of us but from this point on Jesus’ face is set, Jerusalem is his goal. It’s the verse that Luke structures the rest of his account around.

The line “When the days drew near for him to be taken up” is a direct play on our first reading. In Israelite metaphysics only Elijah ascended directly into God’s presence without tasting death.

There is the mysterious story of Enoch in Genesis and there is the story of Moses dying but nobody knowing where his burial place was which was taken as evidence of his ascension as well, but the only unequivocal example is that of Elijah.

To this day, Jews set a place for Elijah at the Passover table, with the hope that his presence will be a harbinger of the Messiah!

Luke is hinting that though Jesus is heading to Jerusalem to die that is not the ultimate reason he’s going there! He’s going in order to be “taken up,” to be more alive than even he, certainly than his followers, can imagine!

This orientation to Life, capital L, is meant to inform our interpretation of Jesus’ journey towards Jerusalem which we know is towards the cros but all his interactions in these stories and Christ’s interactions with us at this table, this morning.

Christ is concerned with one thing: Life! As Paul puts it “For Freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.”

What is this Freedom? What is this yoke of slavery? What, indeed, is this Life?

And that’s the problem, isn’t it; we all have conceptions of these things, conceptions formed by our experiences, our knowledge of the past and by our desires.

And a lot of that is good and true and beautiful. But woven in, as well, is a shallowness of thinking that is not aligned with God’s conception for us to be images of the divine nature, to be in our human bodies and souls expressions of the Divine Life.

The Biblical vision recognizes this mashed up reality.

The New Testament understands that adding laws to correct behaviour, expounding philosophical principles to add our knowledge, good as though these things are, are about as effective in our transformation as trying to return spilled milk to the carton free off a dirt floor!

Jesus and the writers who begin to interpret him in the New Testament understand that the key to human beings is desire! It is our desires that are led astray into the works of the flesh that Paul mentions in our second reading.

By which he means not that our bodies are bad but that our desires shorn of God’s will lead away from human flourishing and all that that means.

The Life that Christ comes to give comes to us as we experience the conversion of desire, a conversion of desire that comes as God’s gift to us!

Given the story of the Samaritan woman Jesus speaks to at the well; given the parable of the Good Samaritan a few verses after this story we might have expected one those “the disciples get it wrong but the outsider gets it right” stories

But in fact, here the outsider is portrayed as inhospitable, an act of hate in that culture. We live in a society where messed up understandings of tolerance on one side and hateful racially charged ideas on the other sometimes make it difficult to say that the outsider can be hateful too!

So Luke is nothing if not realistic about whomever he writes about; what is transformative is Jesus’ action. His disciples are sure that calling down fire is the answer; indeed that’s what Elijah had done to the prophets of Baal and isn’t Jesus a prophet?

Here Jesus shows us that religion is one of those containers into which the human desire for vengeance, for “getting my way” has been poured. All our containers, whether they be politics, economics, family relationships, work, leisure; all of them are caught up in that mashup of human reality that is both beautiful and marred.

His refusal to act “like a prophet,” begins to crack open all our cultural containers by exposing our most fundamental way of acting in the world which isn’t so much freely chosen action as it is reaction, reactivity is our greatest scourge.

We know, at one level, when we’re thinking intuitively or rationally, that to live non-reactively; to not have to “get my way,” to not simply respond to a slight with another, often more severe slight, would transform our marriages, our relationships, our work, our leisure, indeed our life’s purpose but try as we might we can’t seem to do it!

The point of Jesus’ amazing responses in our Gospel, to all he encounters here at this table, is that we can’t overcome our reactivity without a profound conversion to a greater Desire.

It is only this greater Desire that will allow us, not to negotiate with Jesus but begin to follow him!

As they stand, what Jesus asks of those approach him in these small scenes is impossible; it’s why we’re initially quite hesitant to let this story into our hearts; to put it bluntly, those who think Jesus was a cheerful, self-help teacher who went around patting children on the head and feeding those who’d not had their latest meal have never read this story.

It turns out we can’t really follow Christ by adding a little bit of him on the side; we can’t add him to home and hearth or to our business affairs. Rather Jesus dares to say that if people desire to be his followers all that they hold dear will be redefined, reshaped and changed.

But not negatively, God no! The containers of our shallow existence will begin to broken up to towards Desire, capital D, a desire for God’s Life and this means everything and will change everything.

All the disciplines that study human behaviour are clear on this, as is the New Testament: Desire always wins! It’s far more powerful than reason or duty.

In the mashed-up reality that combines the beautiful and the marred we are often confused about our deepest desires.

Is it to maintain the status quo; even the sacred status quo (it doesn’t get much more sacred in any culture than burying a parent!). What about the Church’s status quo? Is it simply our call to maintain Anglican parishes as if the last 50 years haven’t happened?

Here’s where it gets interesting; we can’t tell on principle; rather, the good news of the Gospel is that Christ is here, just as he was in those encounters to sort our desires and to draw them to himself!

This was the reason he framed the choices he did: home *or* Christ; sacred duty *or* Christ; thirdly, the man who wants to put his affairs in order; that is, living “responsibly” *or* Christ.

It’s not that Jesus imagined that we wouldn’t bury our fathers and mothers or have homes or give a percentage of our income to the church and the poor; he certainly did; on principle at least!

But by putting things in such start terms Jesus gives those who encounter him the gift of sorted desires and the invitation into a great desire!

I was determined to live the single life but then I met Denise, Denise became more important than even important desires and I rearranged my life around her; my little play on words is Denise always wins!

The call of Christ comes as a gift; Desire always wins; at some level these stories aren’t trying to twist your arm; they are opportunities to see your hearts; they are invitations to you to respond; but you must respond with integrity; if you’re into negotiating with God let it continue until your desires are sorted.

Jesus will always tell you like it is, just as he shared with his original disciples and those who came up to him.

But if his desire calls you it will be as if your uncle leaves and when you go to open your bank account you realize he’s deposited his life savings in your account.

Our Bishop has understand that Christ’s call is the key for our Diocese; she has asked all churches to recognize September 25th as vocations Sunday; she wants us to expect God’s call to ministry to be an active part of our communities, vocations to the priesthood, vocations to the diaconate, vocations to serve generally

As our Bishop puts it Christ’s call to follow him is sometimes direct, sometimes forceful, sometimes gentle but always persuasive, not from threat but through a new heart, transformed desire, faith expressing itself by love.

Amen.