

Sermon for 26 June 2022 @ Bethesda UMC/Baltimore

Third Sunday after Pentecost

Scriptures: 2 Kings 2:1-2 6-14; Psalm 77:1-2, 11-20 (UM798); Galatians 5:1, 13-25;

Luke 9:51-62

“Ambition”

One of our biggest lies in this country is the focus on ambition.

You can see the consequences now, with everybody @ each other's throats, Congress beholden to huge corporations, the Supreme Court politicized, and our international relationships continually mired in competition for top dog status.

Put that alongside our religious tendency to take scripture literally instead of spiritually, or else either line it up with political preferences or ignore it altogether, and you see at least some of the reason we're in such bad moral shape and global danger.

So, now that I've started with hellfire and damnation, let's see what might make some godly sense out of the texts we've agreed to study today.

First, the drama of leaving and of passing the torch, in the famous telling of the loner, Elijah's going on and of his disciple Elisha's taking up his role as key visionary in Israel's development as a body politic and religious institution. We like to admire Elisha's stick-to-it-ed-ness in wanting a double portion of Elijah's spiritual power. Elijah tries to brush him aside; the fellowship of the prophets begs Elijah for help as he vanishes from being their leader ... and the text just leaves us wondering how prophecy continued, and the good news got into the hearts and souls of black slaves enough to make them sing, as they slogged in the fields and died in their tracks and met in their solitary brush arbors just beyond the massah's earshot that, wonder of trustable wonders, we will overcome, we will survive, death be not proud over us, “Swing low, sweet chariot, comin' for to carry me homeif you get that before I do, tell all my friends I'm comin' too...”

Then see Paul hitting the Galatians' lack of charity. The commentary cites verse 15, which is the very opposite of any belief that, if we work hard and mind our own business, we'll be rewarded with all the things we want. What else is ambition in America but that, I ask you? An appeal to our selfish desires is at the root of our whole political and social arrangement ... and was in the beginning, when Thomas Jefferson elevated “Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness,” to the reason for the colonists' breaking away from England. No wonder we are so like Putin and China and all those we compete with ... We ship our selfishness overseas and profiteer against the poor among ourselves ... and have such a hard time putting up with our own

faults as we get smaller and smaller as religious fellowships! Ambition is not redemptive, and never was, and never will be!

As far as the psalm for today goes, it helps to think of the book of psalm as the product of what we'd call personal counseling, and the complaining we hear in Psalm 77 as the script some priest had on hand for use when someone needed most of all to unload his or her troubles to an understanding listener. Tell God. Then, a little lesson in all the troubles God has overcome: Rescue from the Egyptians, creating the world out of chaos, leading the people like lambs

"Now, what was your problem?" Sooner or later, climbing out of despair and damage is headed for blessing ... maybe not in your time, but surely in the end time that we all are edging towards, so come along, sing this song, and go in this flow with us all..."

Finally, as always, we have the double-edged blessing of Jesus. As the commentary states, Luke arranges his story as a journey, because "the life of discipleship is a pilgrimage, and those who follow can expect to share in the fate of Jesus." Racial tension between Samaritans and Jews; the phrase "taken up," which means killed; the irony that the life of freedom requires greater effort than the life of servitude ... all these get down to our own brass tacks. This past week I read of the economist Peter Drucker's insistence that any society that pays its top CEO's more than 25 times what the average worker makes is inefficient at its very base. Worker loyalty is no longer strong; people are restless Etc. And what is our current American pattern? More like 625% of the average worker's pay goes to our top corporate dogs... Ambition, for all its practical value, doesn't even get a hearing among us! We're rigged for confusion and failure.

In sum, folks, I'm spending a lot of time wasting and worrying about our little operation here at Bethesda Church. I'm unable to bring out the best in us. This is the end of the Conference year. Next Sunday's the first in July, when typically you'd get a new pastor. I've not had any word about a change, and I doubt you have either. Ambition? I don't know how to instill it; and I don't see it working in me either, although I feel blessed to be among you, and graced to be as well-prepared, after all these years, to do pastor-type things, and even excited about some of the changes I get to make in my own habits. Right now I understand Conference plans to ask us for a solid list of all the people who identify with us, members and friends, so they can run it through a computer and come up with some fresh ways of connecting with our community ... both our geographic community and our unique qualities that might appeal in this day of broad outreach.

Are we ambitious? That's not the question. Are we willing? Do we understand? Is the secret ambition anyway? Or are we challenged, called, to love one another as we are being loved, and to risk what means most in

the service of a larger dream of service and the re-arranging of our material and spiritual strengths to meet new needs?

Lord, have us close to your heart. Don't let up. Turn us inside out. Teach us. Swing low. Carry us. Home. Amen.