

"Vacation from Jesus?" (26June16)
LuKe9:51-62; Galatians5:1,13-25

This morning, I want to invite you to walk through a few steps of my recent conundrum and join in faithful pondering. I ask you to walk and not snorkel with me, because though I want to share thoughts about my trip to Hawaii, this isn't a travelogue but is spiritual journey. So let's walk.

Our first stop is among the words we just heard from Jesus. It's a great set of quotations and interesting sayings. Any of them is eminently preachable and could be full of lots of conversation. I especially like the oddness of disciples who want to command fire to rain out of the sky just because Jesus didn't stop at a certain village. (Imagine travelling with these guys down the interstate, itching to leave a wake of destruction for every bypassed rest area or unused fast food restaurant as you sped by.)

Then we get to the stuff about following Jesus. It's insistent and doesn't paint all that appealing of a picture. Foxes and birds have holes and nests, but with Jesus you evidently have to camp out or maybe be homeless. Then the odd word about the dead burying their own dead, that with Jesus you can't even go to your father's graveside committal. Finally, to keep your hand on the plow, as the old spiritual sang it. It sounds awfully demanding.

Which is what got me thinking about Hawaii. I got to lay my head in some pretty swanky resorts, at least for my taste. And I dawdled around the beach sipping tropical cocktails, which seems a whole lot more relaxing and less pressing than the words from Jesus that this all needs to happen now, as top priority, so that even otherwise really important aspects of life still can't be allowed to get in the way.

So the point of quandary as you're walking through this with me is whether a Hawaiian vacation is incompatible with following Jesus. Now, please hang with me and don't just write it off as Midwestern stoicism against tropical ease as a guilty pleasure. I'm certainly not eager to look the gift horse in its mouth, but am nevertheless confronted with Jesus' discipleship question.

I was reading some Hawaiian history before the trip, which described the difficulty the stern missionaries had in trying to convert the Hawaiian natives, who didn't want to give up raucous parties and carefree living, didn't even want to have to wear clothes. There are times that question can be in my mind: is Christianity worth it? Do I really want to follow Jesus if it feels like I'm giving up the good stuff?

Yet we are here together today, which says we've already made up our minds to some degree, feeling a persistent tug toward faith. Likely, your weekly Sunday attendance isn't to weigh whether or not to believe in God, trying to convince yourself that following Jesus is right. You probably already relate more to one side of that answer.

So for the first stopping point on the morning's walk, we aren't exactly evaluating *whether* to follow Jesus. We aren't asking if trying to live care-free or to spend ourselves partying (much less the question of whether to wear clothes) would be preferable.

And so when Jesus tells us to follow, not to look back, tells us of inconveniences and disruptions and perhaps even some regrets that inevitably accompany discipleship, we're probably generally not at the point of saying, "Uh, thanks Jesus. But all-in-all that doesn't sound like it's for me. Good luck with that though." We're ready to take him at his word, to take it seriously, or at least to struggle with what it means.

Which, again, is the question of my trip to Hawaii. Does it square with being a Christian and the demanding lifestyle of following Jesus? At this point, it seems the answer would be no.

That makes me anxious and also grateful to move on to the next stop of the spiritual journey, getting past the disappointing conclusion of this first stop by walking or maybe even running ahead to the next question. See, here, luckily a stray verse from Galatians jumps in to our rescue, or at least to my deliverance and excuse for luxuriously relaxing getaway. Chapter 5 verse 1 floats at the front of our reading, cut off from its surrounding verses, but nevertheless a place I'd throw out my anchor and take harbor from storms of dire insistence. "For freedom," it says! "For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery."

Aha! I like it! Praise Jesus for stop two on this spiritual journey! Sweet relief! This isn't only about demands and a bleak outlook of discipleship. No! Just the reverse, when I'm trapped in worry and held in bondage by not having done enough of the right thing, here comes a word of blessing, a word of good news, the strength of the gospel to liberate me. Christ has set us free! For freedom!

Just as it was no exaggeration to question the whole Hawaiian escapade with the first word, this upends it to offer a validation for freedom. Don't submit to the yoke of slavery! Don't feel oppressed or bound by those restrictions. Don't let your life be confined in obeying orders, in being burdened by rigorous work. Freedom! This Galatians message comes so vigorously to defend me and my vacation to Hawaii.

We're free. It would, by definition and at its core seem to indicate we can do whatever we want. Separate from our spiritual journey, that's also a contemplation as we approach

Independence Day, perhaps on a patriotic pilgrimage. What is American freedom about? Is it that we can do whatever we want in this world, to whomever we want? Are there no boundaries or barriers for our behavior? The patriotic question and the spiritual one, the Christian component and the American overlap in pondering this, as we can see. Can we get away with anything? Is the shape of life just in doing what we want, what feels fun, what we can afford, whatever is our heart's passion or—in slightly different language—to gratify the desires of the flesh?

Uh-oh. We seem to be moving on to a third point in this walkthrough. From first saying ocean-side resorts were off-limits to next saying there were no limits and anything goes so feel free to enjoy, we're suspecting that there's something else to face. Or even if we weren't suspecting it, even if we were content bask under Galatians 5:1 (since it remains the extraordinarily good news of our faith), still Galatians moved on and so must we.

The next verse we heard was this: "For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters," (so far so good. We liked hearing this. Until it goes on:) "only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another." Oh!

Now, I know this is paradox, saying that two opposites are both true, that you're totally free yet not. I know that is difficult and confusing. And that exactly is what our faith is. That is why we keep pondering and wrestling and reflecting and praying, because it's not simple or clear-cut. Our faith is neither "all it takes is to do these 10 things" nor is it really "it doesn't matter what you do." So our reading first said, "Don't submit to slavery," but then turns around and instructs us "through love [to] become slaves to one another." Both\and.

Martin Luther picked up this dichotomy in one of his most important writings, called "The Freedom of a Christian." His summary was two apparently contradictory statements: "A Christian is a most free lord of all, subject to none" and yet "a Christian is [also] a most dutiful servant of all, subject to every one."

These two halves, we may split by adding perspectives of other characters: God and neighbors. Let's try it out for God: even if it was a flagrantly expensive expedition, involving carbon polluting jet fuel and intemperant alcohol and problems of tourist economy, my trip to Hawaii does not and cannot separate me from the love or blessing of God. The gifts of Jesus and the presence of the Spirit are not dependent on how well I behaved. On the other hand, switching direction from God to my neighbor, was Hawaii the best choice, the most loving thing, the way to serve others? Or was it more "an opportunity for self-indulgence"?

This is the weighty matter of faith. So I'm not looking to justify myself, that I got to explore beautifully amazing coral reefs to gain appreciation for an endangered part of creation, or that it was worthwhile because of time with family, or that I supported neighbors who were far away, or that it brings me back refreshed, renewed, ready to serve you.

Neither am I looking for you to excuse me, to say it's alright. It may feel like that's what we do in Confession and Forgiveness, but please note that to forgive is not the same as offering excuse. Forgiveness is to say that, even when it's not right, even though what I spent on this lush vacation is part of confessing "we have not loved one another in deed and in truth," still that does not cut me off from God, nor from you, since I hope your faithful love continues to surround me.

This is worth weighing, worth considering, a spiritual journey worth walking through, not to

feel miserable or condemn ourselves, but (at least in part) because we have many appealing opportunities for recreation this summer and all of us—whether spending freetime close or far, in small amounts of time or large—all are among the richest on the planet, meaning we're used to a lot of self-appropriated freedom to do what we want and probably need to be re-attuned to the cost for our neighbors, sisters and brother, human and all creatures, who suffer sometimes because of our extravagance and sometimes because of our neglect.

This is what the love of God calls us to, what the body of Christ lives to do, what the Spirit motivates us to do. If we're not ready to consider the expense of our lives for others, we'd have to wonder whether God is God, whether Jesus is just a pastime, a hobby, whether we're paying attention in this faith to following at all.