From the Pulpit of
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He Set His Face to Jerusalem

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Luke 9:51-62
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One of the things that impresses me so much about star athletes, or superb musicians, is their ability to focus so intently on their sport, or their art. I played basketball in junior high school, and in high school, and I had dreams of someday playing for a college basketball team, and then playing professional basketball. There were so many days when I would come home from school in the afternoon (at least on the days when I didn't have any other activities at school, like band practice or practice for the school play), say hello to my mother, change clothes, and head back to the school – maybe about ¼ mile away – to play basketball. My mother sometimes said it seemed as though I always had a basketball attached to my hand. I had those dreams. But I'm only 6 feet tall, I wasn't all that fast, couldn't jump high enough to touch the rim, had bad ankles, and though I had a nice outside shot I wasn't much of a ball-handler; I have small hands. So that dream didn't come to anything. I also realize that, while I loved to play the game, I wasn't as dedicated to the game as those who have gone on to a college and even a pro career. Their focus, their single-mindedness, their dedication and commitment to the game, is far stronger than mine ever was, because I also had other interests while in school.

So whether it is basketball, or baseball or football, or golf, those who excel – and anyone who makes it to the major leagues excels – that focus includes an intensity that is wonderful to see. For those of you who enjoy watching a golf tournament, you know that the focus of the golfer has to be there on every shot. And after several tournaments, most golfers will take a week off to rest – and the rest is more mental rest than physical rest. Focus. Single-mindedness. Knowing what the goal is and keeping your eyes on that goal. There are people outside of sports or the arts who can have that single-mindedness about what they are doing. Of course, sometimes that single-mindedness can have negative consequences on such things as family life, or a well-rounded life in general. But that sense of focus is an amazing thing.

That is one of the things I appreciate so much about Jesus and his ministry. It has been said by many preachers, and many people, that Jesus came to the world in order to die. We even say that in the Apostles' Creed: "He was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried." Jesus was born, Jesus suffered, and Jesus died. According to that particular creed, Jesus had no life. Born. Suffered. Died. But Jesus lived. Boy, did he live. And he taught us what living this life was all about.

Luke writes that Jesus "set his face to go to Jerusalem," and we can interpret that as meaning that Jesus' sole purpose was going to the cross, which is what Jerusalem means here. And it is true that, when Jesus went up on that mountain with three of his disciples and he was transfigured before them, when he was seen speaking with Moses and Elijah, who were talking about his exodus, his departure, which was to take place in Jerusalem, the cross is very much primary in Jesus' mind and thinking. But I want to be careful to not jump ahead too far in this. And I want to be careful because it is so easy for us who know the story to skip over the 14 or so chapters that Luke includes before ever getting to Jerusalem.

Remember that, according to Matthew and Mark, Jesus' first sermon, after his baptism and the temptations in the wilderness, was "the kingdom of heaven is in your midst; repent and believe the good

news." The kingdom of heaven. Luke doesn't say that. Instead, Luke says that Jesus entered the synagogue in his hometown, the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him, and he began to read: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free." And then, in what Fred Craddock says are the first words of his public ministry that were not from reading Scripture, Jesus said, "Today. Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing."[i] Jesus didn't say that the kingdom of heaven is at hand. He described what a part of that kingdom looked like.

To say that Jesus came to die glosses over so much of Jesus' ministry – the healing passages, the teaching passages, the Sermon on the Mount, the parables, the conflicts with the authorities. And because we so often desire to skip over much of Jesus' public ministry, we could easily miss out on who we are called to be as followers of Jesus, and what we are called to do as followers of Jesus.

In no way am I denying the power of the cross of Jesus, or minimizing that power. Not at all. Instead, I am seeking to broaden the understanding of the why of the cross. If I were to ask you, "why did Jesus die?" my guess is that most of you would say that Jesus died for our sins, that he took the burden of our sins on the cross in order that our sin might be forgiven. And for that answer you would hear the bell dinging that it is a correct answer. But let me ask you this: why did the religious authorities care that much if Jesus was "only" forgiving sins? And even more, why did Pilate care about that? It was Pilate who handed down the death sentence; crucifixion was a Roman death penalty, not a Jewish death penalty.

I know, the religious authorities said that only God could forgive sins, so Jesus must be a blasphemer, and blasphemy was about the worst religious sin there was. Beyond that, however, Jesus was challenging the systems that were in place during that time. The system said that people would bring their offerings of sacrifice to the temple, and the sacrifices would appease God – but, as Amos would say, the smell of the sacrifices caused God's stomach to turn, to make God sick. Those sacrifices won't buy God off, Amos said. Instead, God's desire is that justice roll down like water, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.[ii] Jesus challenged the system by saying that there was a different kingdom, a superior kingdom, in the world, not the Roman empire but the kingdom of God. And Rome didn't like that. So Jesus had to go.

Justice. Righteousness. Healing. Shalom. Compassion. Mercy. Love, including love of enemy, love of the stranger. Inclusivity. Release to the captives (note that Jesus doesn't say release to those who are captive *to sin*, but simply release to the captives. Recovery of sight to the blind. Kingdom of heaven.

The core of Jesus ministry, the core of Jesus' being, the focus of Jesus' life, was the kingdom of God. Over and over again Jesus told the disciples to go out and share that the kingdom of God was here. A town would not receive Jesus? Well, they were still included in the kingdom of heaven. Should we destroy the town in retribution for their shunning you, for their lack of loyalty to you, Jesus? No. They – the Samaritans, of all people – were a part of the kingdom of God.

Three people came to Jesus while he was on his way to wherever they were headed at the time, and two of them volunteered to follow Jesus, but were not able or willing to understand and agree to the idea that following Jesus meant on Jesus' terms, not on their terms. The response to the second man sounds pretty harsh. Jesus said to him, "Follow me." The man said, "OK. But I have one condition. Let me first bury my father." Jesus says "Come. Enter the kingdom." It really is not something where we then lay down the conditions. "Well, as long as you don't ask too much of me." "As long as it won't cost me too much money or time." "As long as I can have two days off a week and enough money to take a long vacation with my family." As long as. Jesus calls us. Again, saying what Fred Craddock said about this passage: "The radicality of Jesus' words lies in his claim to priority over the best, not the worst, or human

relationships." He continues by saying that when the priorities are right in our lives, those human relationships are even more enriched.

The kingdom of heaven. Right now we are a divided people. We are a tribal people. And we are divided not just politically, but churches are divided. Some churches say that if one does not believe they way they believe, one is pretty much automatically condemned. If you don't believe things the way they say they should be believed, you are an apostate, a heretic. To me, that is a narrow understanding of the kingdom of heaven. And it is a narrow understanding because we have set our sights too low.

The other day I finished re-reading a book by Diana Butler Bass called Christianity After Religion. It was written in 2012, and much has taken place in the culture since then, but she has a lot of good insight in the book. At the end of the book she quotes something that President Barack Obama said in a speech where he shared a story about Miami Dade Community College. He said that at the commencement service there, 181 flags, one for every nation that was represented in the graduating class, were marched across the stage, and each one was applauded by the graduates and the relatives of the graduates with ties to those countries. 181 flags. 181 rounds of applause from those with connections to the countries those flags represented. Then he said,

> The last flag, the American flag, came into view and everyone in the room erupted in applause. Everybody cheered. It was a reminder of a simple idea as old as America itself; "E Pluribus Unum." Out of many, one.[iii]

The kingdom of heaven, the kingdom of God. It includes all those 181 countries, and all the countries beyond those 181. It includes those Samaritans, and all those other people who are modern-day Samaritans. It is an inclusive kingdom, an inviting kingdom, a welcoming kingdom, where the only credentials needed are saying Yes to Jesus' invitation to come. In Jesus' day, some people didn't want to hear that; they wanted limits, they wanted exclusivity. In Jesus' day, some people were threatened by the talk of another kingdom, a kingdom other than Caesar. So the kingdom of God was in conflict with the kingdom of the world, and Jesus' single-minded purpose was to proclaim and live the kingdom of heaven. It still is.

May that be our purpose as well.

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[i] Luke 4:18-21
[ii] Amos 5:21-24
[iii] Diana Butler Bass, Christianity After Religion, p. 2666-7