

Blogging toward Sunday

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The disciples are dense and forgetful. They bumble along after Jesus, barely able to keep up. At the transfiguration, this wild and dazzling moment, Peter wants to make nests: "Let's build some booths," he says. The following day Jesus pleads with them: "Let these words sink into you ears." He wants them to understand that he's going to his death, to humiliation, but in the next moment they are arguing about who is the greatest. John is offended when he encounters someone who is not with their group who is casting out demons in Jesus' name. They seem to grasp only a shred of the uncontainable, incalculable, unruly and heartbreaking beauty of Jesus' way.

In the lectionary passage Jesus sets his face to Jerusalem, where he will give his life to save the world and James and John want to know if they should bid fire to come down from heaven and consume a village for slighting him. It's almost funny; the disciples seem more like the three stooges than the Dalai Lama.

As Jesus and the stooges continue the journey they meet people who want to join them. Often people read about these encounters and extract a lesson for Christians, for us, his would-be followers. It goes something like this: "If you want to follow Jesus you must do so wholeheartedly. There is no middle ground. You cannot proclaim the good news unless you've left everything to live it." If that's the case, I don't know how it ever gets proclaimed. If it depends on us becoming "good," or practicing flawless nonattachment, then it doesn't seem like it's very good news. The followers of Christ are dense, forgetful and bumbling.

Maybe these encounters reveal more about the nature of the gospel than about the conditions necessary for discipleship. Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man? No booth can contain him. Whatever he's up to, it's different than making a nest or digging a hole. "Leave the dead to bury the dead, but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God." Maybe the point isn't so much

“you’re not good enough, go away you pathetic failure,” but rather that what we have to do with here, the gospel, the kingdom of God, is so radically alive that anything that has to do with death distracts from it—anything that has to do with hopelessness: lifeless systems, merciless constructs, rigid, graceless standards of purity. The point isn’t that a disciple must be good enough (meet some merciless standard) in order to get approval. The point is the scandalously redemptive, unmanageably living grace of God.