

Bury the Dead

1 Kings 19:15-16, 19-21

Galatians 5:1, 13-25

Luke 9:51-62

Psalm 16

June 27, 2010

Guest preacher: The Rev. Dr. John Maxwell, UMC pastor, retired

After 39 years as a United Methodist clergy family, Margaret and I know something about moving. I think in that time we moved 9 times. Gail and Doug, did you know that this weekend is the official "Methodist moving weekend?" Anyway, you have our sympathies.

When you first know you will be moving, you usually have some time to think about it, weeks, or even months. "Oh, there's lots of time yet," you think. Then as the time draws near, you begin to feel a little panicky. Shouldn't I be packing by now? If you are one of those super-organized people, by the time the moving van, or U-Haul truck, or friends with their pickups arrive, you have everything neatly packed in boxes, the boxes labeled for content, and each box also labeled which room it will go into in the new house. Alas, it never quite works that well. There are *always* things to do at the last minute. On moving day, there is always room for panic. It's now or never! Have you ever felt that sense of urgency, almost like impending doom? Good! Hold that feeling, because now I want you to apply it to this morning's Gospel reading, specifically to Jesus' words to the man who wanted to go back home to bury his father .

Did you catch the contrast between Elijah and Jesus? Elijah is on his way to being lifted up to heaven by that fiery chariot, but he takes time to let Elisha go home and say

goodbye to his father. Jesus, on the other hand, has no time to waste. "*Let the dead bury their own dead,...*" If you are not shocked at Jesus' words, you ought to be. Why?

The fifth commandment says, "You shall honor your father and your mother." Surely there is no greater honor to show our parents than to give them a decent burial. For a Jewish son, this meant seeing that his father was buried within the day if at all possible, sitting *shiva* (that is like a wake), and saying the *Kaddish* prayer daily for weeks on end, but especially every Sabbath in the synagogue. Jesus is commanding this man to ignore the commandment and abandon his father to an uncertain burial. That's shocking! No wonder the religious leaders and eventually many of the common folks condemned Jesus as a blasphemer and a heretic.

Why did Jesus say this? He was forcing the man to realize that the kingdom of God is the most important thing in the whole world, more important than Elijah, more important even than the commandments. Our chance to enter the Kingdom of God is here in the person of Jesus, but it won't be here forever. You must seize the moment and set everything else aside. You must sell all you have to buy the pearl of great price, the field with the buried treasure. The train is leaving the station, the ferry is leaving the dock, the plane is pulling away from the gate. It's now or never. Don't miss your chance!

Compared to the kingdom of God, everything, *everything!*-- even the most sacred duties -- is totally unimportant. Grab it now, or lose it. What is this reign of God? It is not "heaven bye and bye." It is down to earth, right here and right now. Jesus is calling, inviting, *commanding* us to make heaven on earth. Everything must change. To enter the kingdom, we must die to all we have always thought was so important, and we must do it now. Don't wait until tomorrow. *Everything must change!*

Brian McLaren is a pastor who has written several books, with provocative titles like *The secret message of Jesus*, and *Everything must change*. In that second book he tells about a trip he and his seventeen-year-old daughter took to Burundi in Africa. You need to understand that the situation in Burundi was far worse than Rwanda. Their civil war had gone on for decades, and far more people had died from genocide than even in Rwanda, with the Twa caught in the middle. The Twa are the people we used to ignorantly call the Pygmies; *everybody* beat up on them. McLaren and his daughter were going into this very dangerous place to attend a conference of young African Christian leaders who desperately wanted to bring peace to their nations. One of their number, a young African named Claude, had invited McLaren.

At the conference Claude addressed the group. He was a "PK," a Preacher's Kid. He began by saying that in all the years he attended church, often five or more times in a week, he only ever heard one sermon. His listener's gasped. "It's true," he said. "The sermon went like this: "You are a sinner, and you are going to hell. You need to repent and believe in Jesus. Jesus might come back today, and if he does and you are not ready, you will burn forever in hell." His listeners laughed, not at hell or damnation, but in agreement. They, too, had only ever heard the one sermon, first from missionaries, then from their own preachers.

Now that he had their attention, Claude asked, "Did God only care about our souls going to heaven after we died? Were our hungry bellies unimportant to God? Was God unconcerned about our crying sons and frightened daughters, our mothers hiding under beds, our fathers crouching by windows, unable to sleep because of gunfire? Or did God send Jesus to teach us how to avoid genocide by learning to love each other, how to

overcome tribalism and poverty by following his path, how to deal with injustice and corruption, how to make a better life here on earth--here in East Africa? " "Yes," he said, God does care, but it is up to us to do something about it." "Did we Hutus ever hear even one preacher tell us Jesus said to love those Tutsis?" Did you Tutsis ever hear even one sermon telling you to love the Hutus?" Or for any of us to love the Twa?

The conference went on, with McLaren also speaking to the group and leading them in some exercises. The next evening McLaren happened on a woman named Justine in the dining hall. She was sitting at a table with her head down on her arms. He got someone to ask her if she was sick. Her reply was direct. "I'm OK, but I am shaken up. I see that the kingdom of God is about changing this world, not just escaping it and retreating into our churches. *Now everything must change!*"

This applies to us, too.. We pay lip service to the Sermon on the mount, to the way of life Jesus taught us, and then we go our merry, destructive way, either ignoring him, or co-opting him, as it suits *our* purpose.

Let me give two examples. Several weeks ago in Oregon I saw a bumper sticker, that read: "When Jesus said 'Love your enemies,' I don't think he meant kill them." Or, when he said, "Pray for your enemies," did he give us permission to be selective, "I'll pray for this enemy, but not for that one?" I won't embarrass you by asking how many pray daily for the president you did not vote for? You know, how many Bush supporters pray for Obama, and how many Obama supporters pray for Bush? Or, how about this one: Does anyone pray for Osama bin Laden? I have tried it a few times; believe me, it is not easy! "Love your enemies." Was Jesus serious? Yes! P.S.: there is a "prayer for our enemies" in the Book of Common prayer, page 816, number 6.

It is indeed time to leave the dead to bury their own dead, and to truly follow Jesus. It is time to listen to what *Jesus* says, to "read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest" his sermon on the mount. Hard? Yes! Scary? You bet! But, if we Christians don't start living as Jesus told us to live -- and that includes praying for and loving our enemies -- then things will just keep getting worse. *Now is the time! Everything must change!*

Amen!