

Proper 8, Year C, Pentecost 5
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Jesus said to him, "No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God."

My dad grew up in the country outside of Alexandria, Louisiana during the depression. His family always had a garden, which was not only practical, but a necessity for their family of 8 children. As most of you know, I grew up in several towns and cities - living in 5 different places before I was 10. Most of them were small cities and large towns - nothing hugely urban, but nothing that included a farming community per se.

The fifth town - Sewanee - is, as you know, a college town, and the college was pretty much all there was besides a hardware store, a post office and a grocery. But the house where we lived had a bigger yard than any we had had before, and part of the back yard was separated from the rest of it by a line of some kind of trees.

It was in this back part of the yard that my daddy decided to make a 'real' garden. He plotted it out carefully, with rows of corn, several tomato plants, and a bunch of other stuff I can't remember. I wasn't into vegetables much back then. When he had decided what he would plant and where it all would go in the plot, he drove down to Winchester, the county seat, which was a much larger town than Sewanee, and which had a store that sold tillers.

He bought one. I remember it. It was big and red and he wouldn't let any of us touch. My mother thought he had lost his mind.

It was the closest thing to a plow I had ever seen.

I watched Daddy sweat and strain with that tiller as he tried to turn over his dream garden. It (the tiller) was way bigger than it needed to be, but he wouldn't admit it, and making the tiller move in any kind of coordinated direction was quite a struggle for him. It sort of looked like the struggle on TV comedy shows of someone working a floor buffer for the first time. If Daddy looked to the right or left, off he went in some direction other than straight ahead.

If you've ever flown over any part of the Midwest, you've probably seen the wonderful patchwork of fields below, with the lovely patterns of lines - straight except for the gentle curves at the corners, rows equally distant one from another, no matter what the time of year and the phase of planting, growth and harvesting. I've always been fascinated with how they get that way. Perhaps it was those early adventures in gardening with my dad that made this so captivating for me.

Apparently, large-scale farmers are pretty particular about how their fields are sown and harvested, and they aim for straight, even rows instead of rambling, squiggly ones. Nowadays, that is accomplished with huge combines that are hugely expensive. For farmers there's a huge commitment in terms of time, energy, and expense. So, farmers are fully committed and know a thing or two about risk. These farmers truly put their hand, indeed their whole lives, to the plow, and they don't look back. What they do is serious work, risky business, and a way of life—not just a job and sometimes not even a living.

In today's gospel reading Jesus has a few choice words to say to three would-be disciples, and he doesn't sugarcoat any of his words. Jesus is headed toward Jerusalem; he is on divine mission and those who follow him must be ready to leave everything for the sake of the gospel. The first volunteer responds with great eagerness but without a clue. Maybe that person was envisioning future glory and the reign of a great king; however, Jesus is quick to explain that even wild animals have more worldly security than God's son.

The second person wants to follow Jesus but says he needs to stay to bury his father first. What most of us don't know is that that does NOT mean his father is already dead. Instead, he is talking about the cultural requirement that a man's sons are supposed to stick around to take care of him and to see that he gets a proper burial when he dies. But Jesus says, no, go now and proclaim the kingdom of God. Forget about appearances and expectations.

Finally, the third would-be disciple says he is interested in following Jesus under the condition that he may fulfill family honor with proper farewells. In response, Jesus says you can't start plowing and look behind you. Any farmer can tell you that kind of commitment will result in a crooked furrow.

If a farming metaphor is not something that means much to you, how about the athletes of the various World Cup soccer teams? Think of the hours of physical training, repetitious drills, aches and pains. Consider the expense of traveling to matches around the world, and sacrificing any semblance of a 'normal' lifestyle. Or how about a professional musician? There are years of lessons and hours upon hours of practice and rehearsal, and the expense of an instrument. You can't do either of these things without a serious commitment.

Yet, here we are in this church, being offered the promise of eternal life, and what kind of commitment do we make? We -- 21st century North American Christians -- are for the most part products of the Low Expectation School of Discipleship. We give an hour on Sunday (and complain if the service runs over), put around 2-4% of our treasure on earth in the offering plate, and if we're really involved, teach a Sunday School class or go to a meeting every so often. Would that kind of commitment work for the farmer, the athlete or the musician? Of course not.

No wonder Jesus' words were so strong; they are known as the 'hard sayings'. After all, he knows our human nature. He knows how hard it is for us to commit and to sacrifice for something we can see, much less something with so many unknowns. He knows that we like certainty and control. He also knows our tendency to take our eyes off of the prize, to look back, to falter, and even to fail.

In a few minutes, we will baptize Olivia Ann Kelley. Her parents and godparents are making the commitment for her - the commitment to raise her to know about God and to know who she is and whose she is. They are promising to help her to understand and to keep the vows they will make on her behalf. That is a huge commitment. But they will not have to keep that commitment by themselves. The rest of us also make a commitment: to do all in our power to help them raise Olivia in her life in Christ. Commitment is hard - it takes hours of practice and years of lessons. But if we are all committing together, it's easier.

We're talking about commitment to God - to look forward to the One who loves us and cares for us. Not one that says our families aren't important or that we can't say goodbye, but one that says that all of us are part of the same family - brothers and sisters of Christ, children of God. If God is our biggest priority, then

we can see our way to acting out the reality that we are all lovable and loved, that we are all part of the same community. Can we make that all-important commitment to follow Jesus and do the job we are called to do: that is, loving God, loving our neighbor, and loving ourselves?

Thanks be to the One who offers us grace, and love, and hope -- hope that keeps us plowing—no matter how crooked the furrow. Amen.