

## This Gracious NOW

Acts 2: 47-42; (Psalm 133); 2 Corinthians 6:1-10; Luke 9:51-62

*This is Br. Abbot Daniel's sermon for the service of profession at the 2013 retreat in Claremont CA, October 21.*

Every story has its now, even if it is a memoir. The Now is where the action happens. The only time we can act is NOW. NOW is when we hear a call and respond, or we don't. NOW is when the main character pulls the knife and slashes! NOW is when she makes the jump shot 1 second before the final buzzer. NOW is when each of the little pigs decides whether to build with hay, wood or bricks! In your story, NOW was when you said "Yes" to the proposal or "No" to the shady deal. NOW is when we change course or give into temptation or procrastination.

The gospel story of Jesus' encounter with three would-be disciples presses the NOW of call and response. Jesus is on his final road trip. He has set his face to go to Jerusalem for the world's destiny.

On the way, Luke tells us of three encounters.

-A volunteer sees the parade going by with Jesus out in front and he says, "I'll follow you." Jesus knows she doesn't get it: following him is less secure than the life of a wild animal and so he tells her, "Foxes have lairs and birds have nests, but the Chosen One has no place to rest."

-Then Jesus calls another traveler to follow him, but the man stammers, "Uh, Uh, sure! But first, I have to bury my dad?" Jesus asserts the NOW, "Forget about him; go now and proclaim the reign of God."

-The third traveler, like the first, volunteers: "I'll be your follower, Rabbi, **but first** I have to go home and say goodbye." Jesus is in no mood for "but firsts"; his call is NOW and he says something about plowing and looking back.

Jesus is living in the awful, urgent NOW and the characters in the story don't get the gravity of Jesus going to Jerusalem to die for the life of the world. They

aren't ready for casting their lot in with a man going to the gallows. For Jesus its NOW or never. For them it is *mañana!*

Why this reading today, along with the Acts 2 and 2 Corinthians 6? I am a lectionary guy. I know! No table of pre-appointed readings is perfect. I know that. But I trust the wisdom of the Church more than I trust my subjective inspirations. So, I looked in the *Book of Common Prayer's* lectionary for the "Common of Saints" and selected the second set of readings for "For a Monastic". Of course the idea of celebrating a monastic like Thomas Merton or Ignatius of Loyola or Hildegard of Bingen is to *remember* them and their lives of holiness, sacrifice and grace. For them, it's a wrap. Their story is over. In a sense *their stories are idealized*. When they die, a few decades or centuries pass and we collapse all their NOWs into perfection! A perfect NOW of devotion, discipline, and a single-minded desire for God.

Their NOW is over. We celebrate and remember them in order to aid and inspire us in the NOW of our trek. Sr. Mary O and I find our days enriched and our souls stunned by the lives of the saints are we in their commemorations in Morning and Evening Prayer using *For All the Saints* (2<sup>nd</sup> edition, edited by Sr. Heather Josselyn-Cranson) or the Episcopal Church's *Holy Women, Holy Men*.

The fact is our stories are still being told. That's the context of the readings here, today! We are still on the road with Jesus. For us another NOW is here, this morning, as we are on the cusp of professing vows to live the Rule of Life and Service.

What does this NOW portend? Does it anticipate that we are becoming one with a idealized community like the reading from the Book of Acts where "Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people"? [Acts 2] Does this NOW of profession mean you will be part of a community that oozes with "how good and pleasant it is when the brethren live together in unity"? [Psalm 133] Or does this NOW portend "trials, difficulties, distresses, beatings, imprisonments ... hard work, sleepless nights and hunger"? Does this NOW place us squarely inside the dicey paradox of seeming "to have nothing, but possessing everything"? [2 Corinthians 6]

Jesus is heading for Jerusalem again this morning and he isn't messing around. He is punching it! Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote that Christ calls us to come and die. The monastics, mystics, martyrs and saints lived by the *evangelical counsels*, sometimes called the *counsels of perfection*. They understood that taking vows of poverty was not required for eternal life, but that for those Jesus called, it was a means of grace. In other words none of us has to profess vows, but if we do we can expect to be challenged. A Rule of Life is a means of grace in moving to perfection and wholeness. They discovered their calling in Jesus' sayings like "*If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.*" (Matthew 19:16-22)

Our Rule of Life and Service, is not cast in the classic terms of poverty, chastity and obedience. Yet our Rule of Life and Service is a means of realizing God's grace perfecting us in love. It aims at complete and utter conversion of our attitudes, affections, commitments and manner of life.

To think that our rule has a lesser aim is to diminish it. To divorce it from Jesus' evangelical counsels is to turn it into a caricature, a religious trinket. Our rule is about *stability of purpose*. It anchors us in Jesus, and in his community, and in the means of grace, including the "call to service."

This stability is having our mind and heart staid on Jesus, as the old spiritual puts it. Our Rule is not "good" in itself. The opposite of diminishing the rule is exaggerating it. It is a means to an end and that end is God. John Wesley said it memorably, "In using all means, seek God alone." (Sermon 16, "The Means of Grace")<sup>1</sup> The Rule of Life and Service in this community is a means of following Christ more closely under the action of the Holy Spirit until there are more and more NOWs of total dedication to God, who is loved above all. If we are a community of religious informed by the tradition of monasticism, this deep formation and dedication is our NOW story in Jesus' story—his eternal NOW.

The fact is, our story is still being told.

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<sup>1</sup> The fuller quote: "In using all means, seek God alone. In and through every outward thing, look singly to the power of His Spirit, and the merits of His Son. Beware you do not stick in the work itself; if you do, it is all lost labor. Nothing short of God can satisfy your soul."

So the NOW of our profession puts us right back in the NOW of gospel story. We say, “I will follow you, *but first...*” You know its true! The truth is that we who have professed our vows and those who are about to profess our vows do so with genuine intent. But it is so human to add, “*but first...*” “But first” There it is in all of NOWs of our lives where we are not yet converted, not yet *staid* on Jesus, not yet ready to heed the call to service or to live for the church, or to seek the sacramental life.

You know what I’m talking about! We seem more prone to the counsels of precaution than the counsels of perfection. We are more habituated to the contended life than the consecrated life. In the same breath we say, “Lord” and “But first....” *We follow conditionally!* In Jesus, our conditional bumps up against his absolute.

And his absolute NOW is too intense. That is what this story helps us to see! “We don’t get it! We’re not ready! We can’t take it in, this deep, persistent call to follow.” It is too intense. It’s like at the movies: when the action becomes too intense, we suddenly have a huge urge escape, go to the bathroom or to refill the popcorn! How shall we deal with this story?

My Christian education professor taught me a word I have never forgotten. It is “heuristic.” He talked about *heuristic faith*. You can get the idea of heuristic from the expression, “Eureka! I found it!” “Eureka” and “heuristic” come from the same Greek root, “eurisko.” So a heuristic device is like a model or a hunch or rule of thumb that leads us to a discovery or understanding. Plato’s *The Republic* described an “ideal city.” It functioned as a means to explore politics and connections. It invited conversation about the necessary conditions of a human community.

Could we read the story of the three would-be disciples *heuristically*? If the story functions heuristically, it points us to the *ideal* so that we see how the consecrated life looks, what its conditions are, what it feels like, and what freedom from entanglements and fear it leads to. That’s its function in Luke for us today. It helps us discover the NOW that is expected of us but which can’t be realized in *an all at once NOW*.

It may be possible for our heart to be converted all at once, but *formation* of our lives takes time—a lot of nows! When I was eighteen I said to God, “I’m

yours. I'll go where you want me to go; say what you want me to say." In my heart I meant it, but it was more than I was then or now fully formed to embody!

For example, Martin Luther King Jr. did not lead the civil rights march from Selma to Montgomery the first time Jesus called. He knew Luke's text of Jesus setting his face to go to Jerusalem (Luke 9:51) and this text of the would-be disciples. Preaching these and other texts helped him to imagine himself and the nation drawn up into the arc of the universe as it bends toward justice. The truth is that the civil rights movement was discovered and birthed in liturgical events, in singing and swaying, in preaching and painting the pictures of justice, in sharing the bread and cup of salvation given for the dignity of all people. Somewhere King says that in preaching he put himself out beyond where he was able or willing to go at the moment, but once he'd preached it to others he found the grace to go beyond fear to lead the march.

So, this morning we sing and proclaim the gospel heuristically. We see the ideal and we profess our vows heuristically. We embrace the ideal and then live the real! The absolute NOW is for celebration of those who have lived their lives. We—you and I—our story is still being told. So we keep coming back to the story, hearing it again and again, and we discover what it feels like to be told, "Whoever puts a hand to the plow but keeps looking back is unfit for the reign of God."

Yes we've put our hand to the plow and looked back, but NOW trusting in God's grace, we dare brave another liturgical moment:

    "to affirm our commitment  
    to living out our baptism  
    through the Rule of Life and Service  
    of the Order of Saint Luke."<sup>2</sup>

We do this without fingers crossed. Without pollyana. We do this gladly and hopefully in this gracious NOW.

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<sup>2</sup> From the "Introduction and Charge" in the service of profession, The BOOK OF OFFICES AND SERVICES, p. 87.

