

Pastor Gregory P. Fryer
Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
The Midweek Liturgy, Wednesday, August 30, 2023
Matthew 8:18-22

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

HOLY GOSPEL Matthew 8:18-22, RSV

Jesus is in Capernaum, the town he moved to as a grownup. He was born in Bethlehem of Judea and raised in Nazareth in Galilee. But as a grownup, he relocated to Capernaum. It is along the Sea of Galilee. And so when Jesus gives order to go over "to the other side," he means the other side of the Sea of Galilee. When they cross the Sea, they will land in the country of the Gadarenes, where he will have dealings with two demoniacs.

¹⁸Now when Jesus saw great crowds around him, he gave orders to go over to the other side. ¹⁹And a scribe came up and said to him, "Teacher, I will follow you wherever you go." ²⁰And Jesus said to him, "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of man has nowhere to lay his head." ²¹Another of the disciples said to him, "Lord, let me first go and bury my father." ²²But Jesus said to him, "Follow me, and leave the dead to bury their own dead." (Matthew 8:18-22)

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Let us look at the final two verses of our reading. It is a difficult passage. It goes this way:

²¹Another of the disciples said to him, "Lord, let me first go and bury my father." ²²But Jesus said to him, "Follow me, and leave the dead to bury their own dead." (Matthew 8:21-22)

St. Augustine has a pious and eloquent explanation for this passage. He argues that Jesus is calling this man to an even more important work than burying this father. The saint says this:

What he [the man] wished to do was an act of dutifulness; but the Master taught him what he ought to prefer. For He wished him to be a preacher of the living word, to make others live...This young man then wished to obey God, and to bury his father; but it is place, and time, and

circumstance, which is in this case to give way to place, and time, and circumstance. A father must be honoured, but God must be obeyed. He that begat us must be loved, but He that created us must be preferred. "I am calling thee," saith He, "to My Gospel; I have need of thee for another work: this is a greater work than that which thou wishest to be doing. (NPNF1, Volume 6, St. Augustine)

This explanation makes sense to me because of the word "disciple." The man is a disciple. He is a follower of Jesus. I can agree with St. Augustine that Jesus has important work for him to do — perhaps even more important than burying his father. The man had no reason to doubt that Jesus was calling him to entrust the burying of his father to others and to instead stay with him, with Jesus. Likewise, if you and I could be likewise sure of the matter, we should neglect even otherwise good deeds. It is just that till Christ's kingdom comes and we can see Jesus face to face, we cannot always be sure that the will of Jesus for us is to neglect some normal duty in life. If we are sure, then let us go ahead and do what Jesus wants us to do. But if we are uncertain about the matter, we should probably go ahead and bury our fathers and other such good deeds.

But I have a simpler explanation for this passage than that of St. Augustine. And it is an explanation that applies to the man in the story, but even more to you and me. For we are disciples of Jesus too. We are his modern-day disciples here in New York City. To my mind, the key word in the passage is "go." The disciple speaks of going: "Lord, let me first go..." And this, we must never do. We must never go from Jesus.

We must never go from Jesus even when we are off to do some otherwise interesting or secular work. What this amounts to is that we should always remain mindful that we belong to Jesus. Whether we are by ourselves out there in the meadow in a rainstorm or in the boardroom of a business, we should remember that we bear the name of Jesus, and we should try to bear that name with integrity. Let us take no holidays, no vacations away from Jesus. Even when we are doing honorable work, like burying our father, let us try to make that work even more honorable if possible by remaining Christ's man, Christ's woman, Christ's boy, Christ's girl.

And certainly we should never go from Jesus in order to go to some place of vice or sin or crime. Let us not go from Jesus into a direction that Jesus himself would not want to go. A disciple simply cannot do that. A disciple must not suspend his closeness to Jesus for a while in order to turn to something of which we figure Jesus would not approve. Our life as the disciples of Jesus must not blink on and off. We might wander in this world, but let not wander away from Jesus, to whom belongs the glory with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.