



## Sermon

June 27, 2010  
The 5th Sunday After Pentecost  
Luke 9:51-62  
Historic St. George's United Methodist Church  
Rev. Alfred T. Day III

### Purple Passion

My family rolls their eyes, shakes their heads and gives one of those “Do you believe this guy?” looks at my finding theological themes every time we go to the movies. They think I’ll find sermon material in *Jaws* or *The Hangover*. This is a bum rap. I like to have fun at the movies as much as anyone. But sometimes, there are scenes or lines of dialogue that stir up the gospel.

I don’t think anyone will roll your eyes at this bit of inspiration from the *The Color Purple*, the film based on Alice Walker’s marvelous novel. Two main characters, African American women living in the Deep South in the 1930’s, are talking about God. (See, like I said, I’m not working overtime finding something here.) Shug Avery is a liberated, attractive, effervescent, stylish, worldly, night club singer. Miss Celie is a scrawny, abused, illiterate, pitiful, homebody, so dominated by her husband she calls him “Mister.”

These two women are talking about God. Shug, who takes to educating backward Miss Celie about life beyond the farm says: “More than anything else, God loves admiration.”

Miss Celie, with little more than what’s in her heart and lessons from the school of hard knocks replies: “God loves admiration? You saying God’s vain?”

“Naw,” says Shug, “Not vain, just wanting to share a good thing. I think it makes God angry if you walk by the color purple in a field somewhere and don’t notice.”

I’m not sure God is ticked-off when we walk by a purple field and fail to stop and flatter the Almighty. But I am sure God wants us to pay

more attention to purple. Purple is the color of royalty which is why for years it was the color for the church’s Advent season, liturgical time anticipating the birth of the LORD Jesus. Purple is also the church’s color for pain and passion, which is why it remains the color for Lent, the hue for Jesus journey to the cross. Today’s reading from Luke, about Jesus “set[ting] his face to Jerusalem,” cross, pain and passion awaiting, has a purple haze too. (Luke 9: 51)

Some Bible scholars call the portion of the third Gospel that begins here and continues for the next ten chapters (more than 1/3 of the book!) Luke’s “travel narrative.” But this is no AAA trip-tik with geography, daily itinerary and comfort stops. It is a guide to the readers of this Gospel about what it will take to follow Jesus.

Here’s a clue in advance – to follow Jesus is a pilgrimage to a death and resurrection. This is the experience of those faithful to the call of God. Anyone who follows Jesus should expect nothing less. So, following Jesus will require an overhaul in expectation and behavior because who sets out on a trip expecting to die and live again?

One day, Luke says, Jesus and his disciples came to a fork in the road. At this fork Jesus takes the Jerusalem leg. Along the way, he sends some of his disciples ahead to a Samaritan village. This may NOT screech in your ears like it would have to the first hearers of this text. They would have looked at Jesus like my family looks at me coming from the movies. Or worse! Samaria? Are you kidding me? With THOSE people who think WE have it all wrong

about God, who WE know are just as wrong as they think we are? You are sending us to them?

With an attitude like that, it's no wonder the opportunity to get to know Jesus is rejected by the Samaritans. And his disciples want to call in an air strike. BUT Jesus is not interested in payback. Preach and offer God's good news and if folk don't welcome the message, move on. That was his M.O. So they journeyed on. It's as true now as back in the day: the direction Jesus wants to head is not the direction some folk want to go.

A little further down the road, Luke introduces us to three people, who unlike the blanket-ity-blank Samaritans seem genuinely interested in coming along with Jesus, BUT.... One says: "Are you kidding me. Go with you! Who wouldn't want to go with you, Jesus? I'll go with you wherever!" Jesus replies: "Fine, BUT I have no home, no regular place to lay my head. Matter of fact, any bed I have is one someone lets me use. Still interested?" (Luke 9:57-58)

A little further down the road, Jesus spots someone who looks like she wants to come along. "Follow me!" This person doesn't say no. She just has something else to do first. Important, too. "BUT let me go bury my father." A reasonable request. A solemn obligation. It says in Holy Scripture: "Honor thy father and mother."

Jesus' reply sounds harsh and off-putting. "Let the dead bury the dead," as if to say, In the God's business, its life not death the mission is all about. Announcing the new life of God's realm here and now is as urgent as it gets. If you're not on that road you're as dead as the stiff you're burying." (Luke 9:59)

A little further down the road, someone else. "I'm ready to go with you Jesus, BUT I have a few things to tidy up in my personal life, then, I'll get in line." There's precedent here. From the Elijah and Elisha story. Elisha requests going home to get hugs and kisses from the folks before taking on the mantle of Elijah. (I Kings 19:19-21) Jesus says Phooey to that. "If you're busy looking behind you, how you gonna plow a straight line." (Luke 9:60-61)

This is hard to hear. The Lord has some high expectations. Unreasonable even! Is Jesus or God so arrogant as to demand this kind of admiring attention? (Like Shug was talking about with Miss Celie.). Or is there some purple in the field we're just not seeing.

Honestly, some days I am the disciple sent into Samaria. You? Can you think of times you've gone halfheartedly where following Jesus puts you? I can. Times when what Jesus wants to offer thru me has as much chance of coming through as a snow ball in a hot, humid, Philadelphia June.

Then there are the times I am the Samaritan who rejects Jesus outright. You? Jesus, you may want to come by here but I don't like where you're coming from. The times I resist or reject where God's realm at my helm will take me – shadows of hate, prejudice and mistrust clouding my soul, ways in which I hold on to things that keep me safe and secure, ways I refuse to simplify my life and consume more than my share while others suffer want. Isn't there an unwilling, not-so-good Samaritan in every one of us?

And then there are the times I genuinely want or mean to follow Jesus but things get in the way. I have to take care of this first. If I don't, no one else will! I mean to come with you and go where you're going, Lord, but I can't possibly go without this. Can I take my security blanket along? Will it be in my comfort zone? Can I take this hammer and hatchet along? Can I pack this grudge? Can you wait for more of me when the last tuition payment is paid, until my debt ratio is more balanced, when my kids are grown, when my aging parents aren't a burden?

There are lots of good reasons for missing the color purple.

Honestly, hearing this part of the Gospel read always makes me feel guilty. Feeling guilty is never a good feeling. Matter of fact, feeling guilty spins into all kinds of missteps, misbehaving and misunderstanding. This Gospel pushes guilt buttons, makes us feel like we have been or are mired in excuses like Jesus heard the day he took the Jerusalem fork. And so we close our

ears. We conclude we're doing the best we can with being disciples and say defensively: "Jesus, you'll have to be content with what I'm doing." For heaven'

sake, the kind of loyalty and commitment suggested in this gospel is for religious professionals, fanatics, zealots or folk who don't have to worry about family or make-it-everyday type obligations. Maybe someday.... But...

Feeling guilty is never a good feeling. Neither is feeling like a failure before you even start with Jesus. But pushing guilt buttons or shaming folk into discipleship is what Jesus is after. Ever! I think Jesus is lifting-up urgency. A sense of immediacy. A sense of imperative. Focus about God's calling and Spirit loosed through a life. A powerful, just-have-to share-it sense like seeing a field so marvelously purple, you can't help but notice, you can't help want to tell somebody, you can't NOT share it. Once you do notice, once it's in your mind's eye and heart of hearts, everything changes.

I read something amazing this week that illustrates this; about another woman, a scrawny, abused, beat-down woman; a former slave named Harriet Tubman. She'd heard all the excuses of the false gospel preached by slave masters about how coming to Jesus would save their sin-sick souls AND as a result make for more obedient, conscientious slaves, content with their lot in life. But when Harriet Tubman met Jesus it was different. Oh it touched her heart. It convicted her of her sin and weakness. But she heard a gospel of liberation too. She felt Jesus on the side of the oppressed, not the masters. She felt the Spirit stirring, swelling like it had for Moses: "let my people go."

After she came to Jesus, there was this recurring dream about escaping. In the dream, Harriet saw "a line, and on the other side of the line were green fields and lovely flowers (I'm seeing the color purple) and beautiful ladies who stretched out their arms to me... but I couldn't reach them, no how, no way. I always fell before I got to that line." She saw this vision as the Spirit's signal for her to escaping slavery. (See Sarah H. Bradford,

*Harriet Tubman: The Moses of Her People* (Gloucester, MA.: Peter Smith, 1981).

Tubman says when he escaped to Pennsylvania she had to look at her hands "to see if she were the same person." The sun came through the trees. There was color and glory in the fields (my money is on purple) she'd never seen before. "I had crossed the line. I WAS free... BUT I was a stranger in a strange land....and if I was free, then THEY (everyone I'd left behind in Maryland, and others in the Deep South to) should be free..."

Now here's the part I want you to take in. Having perilously found her way to freedom, Tubman returned to Maryland and points south, not once or five times, or even ten times more, but THIRTEEN more times. Lucky thirteen! Why all those times despite the danger of being captured again? Why? Would you do that? The bounty that was on her head! The perverse glee for the person who imagined stringing her up as an example of what happens to runaways!

But the color purple Harriet Tubman saw was so brilliant, so compelling, so captivating that she couldn't rest until others had it to. "Just wanting to share a good thing," like Shug said to Miss Celie. Excuses paled. Reasons for postponing went away.

That's the color of the discipleship Jesus is talking about, now that he and his followers are on the Jerusalem road. Purple passion. He's doesn't mean to make us feel guilty, failed or hopeless in ability to follow where's he's leading. He wants us to feel and know God's realm, to have so experienced it – God's love, the fruits of God's Spirit we heard about in Galatians (I'll bet the blossoms are what color?) -- love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, self control – that that someone will not rest until everyone can have all that to. "Just wanting to share a good thing – so good, I can't keep it to myself, so good I can't keep still until I give it to you like someone gave to me. That urgently, immediately; I'm restless til I do.

This is the color of discipleship in Luke's travel narrative: Not gray for I know I want to come but I just can't just now. Not yellow for I wish I could but I'm afraid. Not red for No I can't. Or won't. Or red for God's anger and judgment on me if I don't. Not even green for mindlessly saying YES I can without thinking. But purple. Purple for God just blew me away with what I've seen and felt and am coming to know in my heart about what God is doing in life and the world. So I can't sit still. I just have to share a good thing.

The most insightful question anyone ever asked me about my faith was this: "What is the message of God the Spirit is stirring to send through you? What is it about God you want others to know, feel and experience?" My answer to that question, or yours, is another whole sermon. But it's not the answer – today anyway – that's as important as the question. How you and I let that question stir our souls to see the color purple in, around and through our lives, desperately wanting to share that good thing – that's what Jesus is after.

■■■ Amen ■■■