

The Third Sunday After Pentecost (Pride Sunday)
Luke 9:51-62

I Will Follow You Wherever You Go*

The Rev'd Dr. Patrick S. Cheng
The Church of the Transfiguration
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I often say that I went to law school for my parents, but I went to seminary for myself. I'm lucky that I never had a "tiger mom" or a "tiger dad" who brought up their kids in a super strict, traditional Chinese way. But growing up in a first-generation immigrant household, I did feel the pressure to become a successful professional such as a doctor or a lawyer.

As a teenager, I rebelled against Asian American stereotypes about math and science. And so I decided to go the lawyer route. I did all the right things to get into law school, and I eventually became a tax and employee benefits lawyer at a Wall Street law firm. On the outside, it looked like I had "made it" in terms of my professional goals. Financially speaking, I was comfortable. And my parents were happy.

But I had a secret. From a young age, I wanted to be a priest. I loved going to masses at St. Dunstan's, which was our Roman Catholic parish. As a child, I dreamed about getting a subscription to the monthly pew misalettes so that I could read the words of the mass at home. (I guess that was a sign.) As I grew older, however, I set my dreams aside and focused on becoming a lawyer.

But after a number of years of practicing law, I realized in my late 20s that I could no longer ignore the vocational tug that was inside of me. And so, I followed my heart and decided to leave the practice of law and go to seminary.

Looking back on that time, I'm surprised that I made such a bold decision. I didn't have a long-term plan. I wasn't even on the ordination track. In fact, it seemed to most people – myself included – that I was throwing my professional life away. But it wasn't as if I had a choice. I had to follow my vocational calling.

"I will follow you wherever you go." That's what a prospective disciple tells Jesus in today's gospel lesson. He was determined to follow Jesus. But Jesus turns around and asks the would-be disciple if he's really ready to give up the comfort and security of his life. Jesus says, "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." In other words, you must be willing to risk the stability of a traditional home life in order to follow Jesus.

Jesus then calls another prospective disciple. "Follow me," he said. But that person wanted to bury his father first before following Jesus. He wanted to honor his parents in accordance with the Jewish law and to follow his family's customs. But Jesus responds rather harshly: "Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God." In other words, you must be willing to defy the expectations of your family in order to follow Jesus.

Jesus then encounters a third prospective disciple. That person also pledges his loyalty to Jesus. He says, "I will follow you, Lord." But he wanted to first "say farewell" to those in his household. That

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is, he wanted to look back on the past before moving to an unknown future. After all, that's what Elijah allowed Elisha to do in today's Old Testament reading. Again, Jesus responds in a blunt way. He says, "No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God." In other words, you must keep your eyes on the future – and not the past – if you want to follow Jesus.

The point of Jesus' exchanges with the three potential disciples in today's gospel reading is this: Following Jesus is not an easy thing to do. If you truly want to follow Jesus, you must be willing to risk the stability of a traditional home life. You must be willing to defy your family's expectations. And you must be willing to look forward and not back. To follow Jesus means risking security, family, and future – all for the sake of love.

Fifty years ago, on the last Sunday in June in Greenwich Village, a small group of courageous lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people – including homeless street youth and trans people of color – risked their security, family, and future, all for the sake of love. Early on the morning of June 28, 1969, these individuals decided that they were no longer willing to tolerate the routine raids and arrests by the police at the Stonewall Inn, a gay bar on Christopher Street. And so they decided to fight back. And by doing so, they ignited the modern-day LGBT rights movement.

You could say that those Stonewall veterans had a vocational calling of sorts. Like the prospective disciples in today's gospel reading, they were willing to risk the stability of their lives. They were willing to defy family expectations. And they were willing to look forward and not back. All for the sake of love.

For many LGBT people, sexuality and gender identity might also be understood as a vocational calling. Like a religious calling, it's not something that you consciously choose. In fact, it could be something that you've been avoiding for years. But the gentle tug within you eventually grows stronger and stronger until you can no longer ignore it. As a result, you ultimately have no choice but to come out, risking everything – security, family, and future – all for the sake of love. In the end, it's just what you were meant to do.

I should note that people are not the only ones who have a vocational calling. *Institutions* can also have such a calling. On this Pride Sunday, I am particularly proud of the Episcopal Church's vocational calling to support LGBT people for over half a century.

Did you know that in November of 1964, some four and a half years before Stonewall, the *New York Times* ran an article with this headline: "Catholics and Episcopalians Differ on Law for Sex Deviates." At that time, the Episcopal Diocese of New York supported the move by New York State to decriminalize consenting adult same-sex behavior, whereas the Roman Catholic church did not. A representative of our diocese went on record to call decriminalization a "significant and enlightening advance." That was a big deal in 1964.

And in November of 1967, a year and a half before Stonewall, the *New York Times* ran another article with the headline "Episcopal Clergymen Here Call Homosexuality Morally Neutral." The Cathedral of St. John the Divine had just sponsored a day-long symposium about Christianity and homosexuality. The future bishop suffragan of New York, Father Walter Dennis, said that Christians, including Episcopalians, "must rethink the usual position that has turned homosexuals into modern-day lepers." That was also a big deal in 1967.

I'm so grateful that, over fifty years later, the Episcopal Church openly and actively supports the lives of LGBT people. Earlier this month, Michael Curry, the Presiding Bishop of our church, said:

I could speak of how many of you organize our liturgies of worship, lift our voices in song, manage church funds, teach and form our children as followers of Jesus, lead congregations, ministries and dioceses. But through it all and above it all, you faithfully follow Jesus and his way of love. And in so doing you help the church, not to build a bigger church for church's sake, but to build a better world for God's sake.

Later this afternoon, all three bishops of our diocese – Bishop Dietsche, Bishop Shin, and Bishop Glasspool – will be joining the pride march in solidarity with our Episcopal New Yorker LGBT siblings. What a wonderful calling the Episcopal Church has to be in solidarity with the LGBT community!

“I will follow you wherever you go.” That's what Jesus calls us to do in today's gospel.

And so, it is in that spirit that I wanted to share some exciting but bittersweet news with you. After much prayer and discernment, I have accepted a new call to serve as the Theologian in Residence at Saint Thomas Church Fifth Avenue. This means that my time at Transfiguration and with you will be coming to an end. My last Sunday here will be August 25th, some two months from now.

I have walked with you and our beloved parish for almost four and a half years. Words cannot express how much I have loved being here. Each of you has contributed deeply to my priestly formation. I would not be the priest who I am without having served with all of you. As such, you and the Little Church will always be a part of me.

I was not looking to leave our parish when I first heard about this new ministry opportunity. These have been some of the happiest years of my life. And I could not have asked for better colleagues than Fr. John David, Claudia, and all of you. But I have come to realize that the tug of this opportunity was something that I could not ignore. I decided that, once again, I needed to follow Jesus and go wherever he was asking me to go.

Please know that I will be here at the parish this afternoon, and I will be marching with our parish's Pride March contingent. As such, I would love to take the time after mass and speak with anyone who might have questions about my new call. I look forward to journeying with you during the next two months.

I'd like to close with a beautiful quote about vocational calling from Brother Geoffrey Tristram of the Society of Saint John the Evangelist, an Episcopal religious order. Brother Geoffrey was my spiritual director when I was living in the Diocese of Massachusetts. He writes:

You can say no to your vocation. You can choose a life more in keeping with your parents' wishes, social convention, or simply greater security and wealth. But God, who knows the secrets of our hearts, will never stop calling us, inviting us, enticing us, to live the life for which we have been made.

“I will follow you wherever you go.” Let us give thanks today, on this Pride Sunday and fiftieth anniversary of the Stonewall Riots, for all those who risk security, family, and future for the sake of vocation. Let us give thanks to the three prospective disciples in today's gospel. Let us give thanks to the Stonewall veterans. And let us give thanks to our beloved Episcopal Church.

May each of us hear God's call to live authentically and to follow Jesus, wherever that might take us and whatever the cost might be.