

It's been quite a heart-breaking week. With the Supreme Court decisions, with the January 6 hearings, with that all that's come before, even if we wanted to leave it all the door of worship and just have a nice peaceful morning, we would have to leave so much of our hearts and minds behind, I'm not sure we could do it if we tried. But today, Jesus asks us to give up everything and follow him. And given this week I have to wonder – what does that mean exactly? Where is Jesus taking us? What do we bring with us.

I listened to the call to the priesthood for many, many years before finally deciding the follow it. I made the decision on Sunday morning at church. I was working full time as a pastoral minister in a Catholic Church in State College. And I was sitting in Mass one of those Sundays where the readings were about following Jesus, the sermon was about answering the call, the songs were about getting the boat and leaving everything on the seashore. And before the Mass had ended, I had decided to quit my job, leave the Catholic church and join a denomination that would help me test that call – ultimately this one.

The journey up to that point was over 15 years in the making. And the journey after that was also quite involved until my ordination 2 and a half years ago.

But the first thing I did that evening, after telling my husband (who was and is very supportive), was to do a google search. I googled “Lifelong Catholic women who have left the church to become priests”. And a name popped up. Rev. Monnie MacIntyre. She had been a Catholic sister for decades before answering the call to become an Episcopal priest. She taught theology at Duquesne University in Pittsburg. I emailed her and asked if I might visit her to get some advice on how to leave everything behind.

I traveled there over spring break. Monnie and I met at a coffee shop near campus, and I asked her: I've been a Roman Catholic all my life? What do I bring with me and what do I leave behind, if I become an Episcopalian?

And Monnie said in her professor voice: The Episcopal Church is a bridge between the catholic tradition and the reformed tradition. And what is underneath a bridge? She saked.

Nothing, she said. Nothing is underneath a bridge – bring everything.

Now Monnie the theologian was not saying that the Episcopal Church was an empty vessel with no tradition or teaching, but she was saying that all of who I was would be welcome here; essential parts of my Catholic sensibility had already made home there. On this bridge, this way between traditions, I didn't need to leave anything of myself behind, and I could bring my books, and my prayers and sacraments.

Bring everything.

Which seems strange advice, given today's readings, where it looks like we're asked to leave it all behind when we follow Jesus.

Must we really leave behind everything? Must we give up our warm houses? Our family ties? Our livelihood? Our old friends? Parties? Hobbies? Recreational activities?

Yes. ...And no.

Following Jesus into the open-ended life of God, means that we lay down our attachments to all other these things, our temptation to put them first. And while I brought all of who I was onto that bridge that was the Episcopal Church, I really did walk away from an old life. All my relationships changed – with my congregation and with the Catholic church, with friends, with family members – my Mom still doesn't speak of it. She will be 93 next week, bless her soul.

I cut the ties.

But following Jesus also required that I fasten them again with something else -- with the bonds of his love. Not the bonds of fear, or family expectations, or economic advancement, or a sense of duty. Not even the bonds of my own limited capacity for love.

And that, according to people like Paul and Jesus, is how freedom is defined in God's dictionary. We are still bound to one another. But the adhesive changes. It is now the life of God that holds everything together, the love of God that forms the bond.

But there's all sorts of room for doubt to creep in, when you decide to follow Jesus. How do you know it's really God calling, and not your own selfish desires? I was asked that a lot.

In today's letter to the Galatians, Paul gives us a checklist to use to see if God's love, which he describes as the presence of the Spirit, is truly in the lead. He says that relationships where the Spirit is the guiding force produce a certain kind of fruit – love, for example, , and joy, there will peace and patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness and gentleness, and self-control.

We might look at that list and say, well I have that in place for some people, but not everybody. I can love like that sometimes, but not always. My heart's in the right place.

So Paul gives us another list to use to see if that's the case. He lists the fruits of relationships that are animated by something other than the life and love that flow from God. Let's put these in the words we use today –promiscuity, unfaithfulness, sexual abuse, over-indulged appetites, broken relationships, argumentativeness and incessant grievance, jealousy, envy, anger, violence, supremacy, the abuse of alcohol or drugs, chaotic lives.

As I've discerned the walk of the Way with Jesus in my life, these are the lists I use, the filters I consider. What are the fruits? They will tell you if you are free. Or if you are kidding yourself.

Jesus in his humanity knew the consequences of that kind of freedom. He felt the costs. In my reading of today's Gospel, I think he comes off a bit grumpy, frustrated perhaps with his followers.

I will follow you wherever you go! one of his groupies announces. That sounds like Peter talking, but it could have been anybody. It's the kind of thing we say at the church all the time, "Send us out into the world to do your will with gladness and singleness of heart.

And Jesus says "Not so fast." Do you even know where I'm going and where I'm leading you? Do you know what waits in Jerusalem, and what is on the other side? This is more than a Sunday morning or even a day trip. There's no going back.

With another one, Jesus takes the initiative and he says "come follow me." And that person says, can I go home and burry my father, first?" Which seems like a fair request. I can just hear Jesus saying, "Oh dear, is he dying?" And the reply coming, oh no, he's quite healthy. I imagine he has at least twenty more years. I'll follow you after that.

But Jesus doesn't have that much time. "Let the dead bury the dead," he says, "you proclaim the Kingdom." That is what Jesus and his followers are doing along the way.

And while Jesus set his face toward Jerusalem, and while the Temple is there, and the authorities are there, and the cross is there, Jerusalem is not the ultimate destination. It's the place where things will actually begin for the followers of Jesus, for the church itself. But the way of Jesus goes on from there.

Following Jesus does not end with a destination. But ironically, following Jesus might always entail an entrance – an entrance into the Kingdom of God. Perhaps that is why proclaiming the Kingdom of God and following Jesus always go hand in hand. Maybe the follower is just required to describe what is appearing right under their feet. And you can't describe what is appearing right under your feet or what's right in front of you, if your attention is always back on what you have left behind.

What makes it possible for us to follow int his way? What helps us let go of our attachment to everything but the love of God?

My friends, the good news is that help is all around us.

The Pentecost Spirit of God helps us, by filling us with the powerful love of God. The Spirit-filled people of God gathered here, help us, by walking the way of love with us. These ongoing acts of prayer and worship help us, by focusing our attention on the Kingdom of God that is right beneath our feet.

The Way of Jesus itself helps us, as we follow Him deep into the territory that needs that Good News.

Or as Saint Catherine of Siena is thought to have said: It's heaven all the way to heaven.

And if that's the case, why would we ever look back?

Amen.