

**FIRST PARISH CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH
UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST
East Derry, New Hampshire**

Alice M.C. Ling, Senior Pastor

1 July 2007

Thirteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Galatians 5:1, 13-25

Luke 9:51-62

Sing: When you plow, don't lose yo' track, cain' plow straight an' keep a-lookin' back,
Keep yo' han' on that plow, hol' on.
Hol' on. Hol' on. Keep your han' on that plow, Hol' on.

Keep on plowin' and don't yah ti-yah, Ev'ry row goes higher and higher,
Keep yo' han' on that plow, hol' on.
Hol' on, hol' on. Keep your han' on that plow, Hol' on.

If you wanna to get to heaven, I'll tell you how, Keep yo' han' on the gospel plow,
Keep yo' han' on that plow, hol' on.
Hol' on, hol' on. Keep yo' hand on that plow, Hol' on.

I might as well be straight with you and tell you that I fell in love with the song first. We rehearsed it a bunch, have sung it in a few concerts, and if you can believe it, two weeks from last night, we're singing it at the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C. How cool is that? Somewhere along the way, not all that long ago, I used it in a newsletter article. And regularly for the last couple of months, I've found myself saying to both myself and others, Hol' on. This can't last forever; just hol' on. And then it shows up in the Gospel lesson for today. Very honestly, I really hadn't heard that part until I was sitting in rehearsal Friday night, singing away, when I realized that what I was singing was sitting at the end of today's lesson from Luke and I asked, so how does this fit with that? What is this plowing thing anyway? Which means I spent yesterday rummaging around in the farming cobwebs in my brain, consulting with people who have more farming experience than I do, and wandering around on the internet.

We didn't plant corn on the farm I grew up on, so we didn't do a lot of plowing. We did a little, and my childhood impressions were confirmed by others who looked at me like I had two heads and said, you can't plow without looking back! You sit on a tractor, drive forward and look back over your shoulder to watch the plow do its thing, while also looking forward to watch the path of the tractor. How you do all of that and plow straight is way beyond my ability to imagine, but if you're a farmer, you do. I have a vague impression of one, maybe two plow blades. A friend with some real plowing experience from about the same era talked about plowing 3 furrows at a time, and the more current word we picked up along the way was 8 blades, though the way to talk about it seems to be "8 bottom". I assume that's small for a lot of farming operations these days. I didn't call my brother who farms in Missouri to ask about their operation, but I can tell you that I've been known to talk with him on his cell phone while he was baling hay. Yup,

sitting on the tractor in an air conditioned cab, talking on his cell phone, baling hay, or plowing 8 or 10 furrows of field. I don't know how you do all of that at once, but I do know you don't do it without looking back.

And I need to say that I don't think that's quite the image Jesus had in mind when he was talking with that would-be follower. I think the Negro slaves who birthed the spiritual knew exactly what Jesus was talking about, but I don't think it has much to do with our image of plowing. For them, both Jesus and the slaves, plowing was probably walking behind an animal that was pulling a plow blade through a field and turning its soil over, one furrow at a time, opening it up so it could receive seeds. That farmer had a blade in front of him, and the animal in front of that, and every ounce of concentration went into managing those two things. If you looked around or back over your shoulder or across the field for a second, there's no telling where that mule would be off to, or what the plow might strike. We're talking focus. We're talking concentration. We're not talking multi-tasking with one eye back, one eye forward while the mind races off in who knows how many directions. Straight ahead. Don't look back, because in the blink of an eye, all could well be lost.

Don't look back. If you're going to follow me, just do it. Don't look back. Don't multi-task. Don't try to balance 5 sets of commitments at once. Put your hand to the plow, focus on what you're doing, give it – give me your full concentration. Let me and my journey be everything to you. Keep yo' han' on that plow; hol' on.

My sense is that we find this gospel lesson pretty offensive. Actually, very offensive. About the time Jesus says, don't go back to bury your father, let the dead bury the dead; or don't go home to say good-bye; just walk away from the family and come follow me, everything in us rebels. Even the good and loving and faithful part protests, what is wrong with you, man? Family is important! Family needs to come first. We're not talking things or prestige or investments or any of that other stuff that we might be willing to consider giving up for you. You're talking family – and I really can't believe you'd expect me to just up and walk away.

Before we get too bound up in the precise details of what Jesus and his would-be followers have said, let's back up for a minute. What I see in this teaching is someone who says yes, of course I want to come with you. I just have one thing I need to take care of before I can do that. Wait right here – I'll be right back. If you've ever been in that situation, you know that sometimes that's a true statement. Something's boiling on the stove, and if I don't want the house to burn down, I need to go turn the burner off. But sometimes we say, "there's just one more thing I need to do before I can come," as a stalling tactic. While we're doing that one thing, we're scrambling to think of what else we can use to buy ourselves some more time. One thing leads to another, and if we're not careful, we'll never get out the door.

Jesus isn't into stalling tactics, and as uncomfortable as it makes us, he isn't into divided loyalties. And when it comes to discipleship, he isn't into multi-tasking. He wants, needs and expects to come in first among all the other affections, allegiances and commitments in our lives. Very likely, we won't ever be put in a position of having to choose between discipleship and our families, but if push comes to shove, he wants to know God will come in first. And that discipleship will be the framework from which we address questions of every other aspect of our

lives, including family. It's actually conceivable that focus on God and discipleship can give us better perspective and a healthier ability to walk with and love our families.

Slaves sang these songs to help them endure the suffering of their lives. They put themselves and their families and their faith and their longing for freedom into the context of discipleship. They focused on the promises of the gospel no matter what else was happening to them or around them – trusting God to carry them through, trusting that no matter what happened, they would always be at home with God. It was the only home they had that they could count on, and so they counted on it with everything they had in them.

Sing: Got my hands on the gospel plow. Wouldn't take nothin' for my journey now
Keep yo' han' on that plow, hol' on.
Hol' on. Hol' on. Keep your han' on that plow, Hol' on.