



Every now and then someone will ask me about my favorite writers. The first name that always comes to mind is Wendell Berry. Most of the time, when I say his name I get a look of confusion, like, Who is Wendell Berry? Berry was born in 1934 in Henry County, Kentucky. He earned a bachelor's degree from the University of Kentucky in 1956. Two years later he received a Wallace Stegner Fellowship from Stanford. He also taught at Stanford and many other universities. He's the author of more than 40 books. He's won numerous awards and honors. *The New York Times* has called him the "prophet of rural America."

In 1965, Berry moved to a farm he bought—Lane's Landing—and began growing corn and small grains on what eventually became a 125-acre homestead. Lane's Landing is near Port Royale, Kentucky, where his parents were born. He's lived and farmed and written there for almost 50 years. His writing is grounded in the notion that one's work ought to be rooted in and responsive to one's place. The importance of place is a recurrent theme—place embraced and loved, understood and honored.

I've always felt Wendell Berry is a guide to being a pastor because pastoring is a lot like farming. You can plow fields and plant seeds and reap a harvest in a congregation of people as well as a farm. To do it well, you have to know and stay committed to that place. Berry's character Jayber Crow says, "To feel at home in a place, you have to have some prospect of staying there."

I guess that's why I appreciate the story we're looking at this morning in 1 Kings 19:19–21. I've called this story, "Leaving the Farm" because it's about a farmer. Like Wendell Berry farmed land that had been in his family for generations, I'd like to think this farmer felt the same way about his farm as Berry feels about his. But God had different plans for him. I guess you could say God was calling him to grow people rather than crops. The man's name was Elisha.

### **Elisha Leaves the Farm to Follow the Prophet Elijah**

Last week we saw how God gave the prophet Elijah an assignment. He was to anoint three men who'd be the instruments of judgment on Israel: Hazael, King of Syria; Jehu, King of Israel; and Elisha, who would succeed him as prophet. It seems Elijah deemed the enlistment of Elisha to be the most important order of business because look what he did.

**So Elijah went from there and found Elisha son of Shaphat. He was plowing with twelve yoke of oxen, and he himself was driving the twelfth pair.**

**Elijah went up to him and threw his cloak around him. Elisha then left his oxen and ran after Elijah. "Let me kiss my father and mother goodbye," he said, "and then I will come with you."**

**"Go back," Elijah replied. "What have I done to you?"**

**So Elisha left him and went back. He took his yoke of oxen and slaughtered them. He burned the plowing equipment to cook the meat and gave it to the people, and they ate. Then he set out to follow Elijah and became his servant (1 Kings 19:19–21).**

Elijah traveled from Mt. Sinai to Abel Meholah, a town in the Jordan Valley. He found Elisha busy plowing his field with twelve yoke of oxen. Most likely, he was driving only the twelfth pair while other workers drove the remaining eleven. It was common practice back then for several teams of oxen to work together in a row, each with its own plow and driver. After letting the others pass, Elijah threw his cloak around the last man, Elisha. This cloak was the official dress of prophets and so the message was clear: Congratulations! You get to be my successor. Elisha seemed to understand because immediately he left his plow and ran after Elijah. But first he has a request. He wants to kiss his mother and father good-bye. Elijah's response sounds a little like he's still in a bad mood. "Go back," he says, "What have I done to you?" That's not exactly the way to recruit great talent. But most scholars agree what he meant was this: "Go back. I have no problem with that. Just remember you're supposed to follow me afterward." So Elisha went home. I'm sure he did kiss his mom and dad good-bye, but more importantly he threw himself a good-bye BBQ. He slaughtered his oxen, burned his plow to cook the meat, and shared it all with the town. In doing that he was publicly declaring a complete break with his past. Then he followed Elijah and became his servant or attendant.

### **God Calls Each of Us to Follow Him Wholeheartedly**

It's a great story, but what does it mean for us? I think it's obvious this is a story about the call of God in a person's life and what it means to respond to that call. God called Elisha to leave his farm and serve him wholeheartedly as a prophet of God.

We tend to think a calling like that is only for a select few, like pastors and missionaries. I don't believe that. If you're a follower of Jesus, you're among the called. Paul urged the Ephesians "*to live a life worthy of the calling they have received*" (Ephesians 4:1). Peter wrote, "*just as he who called you is holy, so be holy*

*in all you do*" (1 Peter 1:15). Those words refer to all of us as believers. Now what that looks like for each of us will be different. Some are called to serve him as a married person, others as single. Some are called to serve him in vocational ministry, others in the marketplace. Regardless of how and where you're called to serve, you're called to serve and follow him with your whole heart.

One one occasion, there was a large crowd following Jesus. He turned to them and said, *"If anyone comes to Me, and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be My disciple. Whoever does not carry his own cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple"* (Luke 14:26-28). Those are hard words. He doesn't mean "hate" in the way we normally think of hate. He means hate in comparison to me. He means not letting anything, even your parents, get in the way of following me.

Another time someone came up to him and said, "I will follow You wherever You go." If I were Jesus I'd probably say, "Great! Just sign your name right here." But Jesus looked at him and said, *"The foxes have holes and the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head"* (Luke 9:57-58). Sometimes we have the wrong expectations. We think of serving him in glorious terms, but he wants us to know we won't be staying at the Ritz.

Now, the idea of wholehearted devotion, to anyone or anything, makes some of us uncomfortable. It's risky. It's like we're out on a limb. What if the person we commit to lets us down? What if the cause turns out to be not as worthy as we thought? And there's a lot to be said for caution. God isn't calling us to be stupid. He doesn't want us to just rush into things without counting the cost. But once we've discerned what God is calling us to do; then what he wants is wholehearted followers who won't look back when things get hard. He wants disciples so committed to him that they'll burn their bridges; they'll kill their cows and burn their plows.

On April 21, 1519, the Spanish explorer Hernando Cortez sailed into the harbor of Vera Cruz, Mexico. He brought with him about 600 men, and yet over the next two years his vastly outnumbered forces defeated Montezuma and all the warriors of the Aztec empire. He did this after two prior expeditions had failed even to establish a colony on Mexican soil. What was his secret? Cortez knew from the very beginning he and his men faced incredible odds. He knew the road before them would be treacherous. He knew his men would be tempted to abandon their mission and return to Spain. And so, as soon as Cortez and his men had come ashore and unloaded their provisions, he ordered their entire fleet of eleven ships destroyed. His men stood on the shore and watched as their only possibility of retreat burned and sank. From that point on, they knew there was no turning back.

Nothing lay behind them but empty ocean. Their only option was to go forward.

You just cannot have one foot in and the other out. We know this is true in other arenas. Why do we think it's different in our relationship with God? Who wants to be in a marriage where the commitment is half-hearted? Who wants to hear your future spouse say on your wedding day, "I'll marry you but I'm keeping my options open elsewhere"? Or, for a person who wants to get sober and enter into recovery, how well does it work to say, "I want to get sober but once a month I just want to be able to have a couple of drinks"? Why then do we think that works with God?

Have you slaughtered your cows and burned your plows? Or are you still weighing your options; still trying to have it both ways? Are you trying to serve God just enough to keep him happy, just enough to keep your conscience quiet, while at the same time absorbed with the things of the world? Jesus would rather you be a wholehearted pagan. At least then there's hope for your repentance! A half-hearted, so-called "Christian" nauseates God. Jesus told the church at Laodicea, *"I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot; I wish that you were cold or hot. So because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of My mouth"* (Revelation 3:14-15). Who wants to do that? Who wants to make God sick?

There are a number of things in this story of Elisha's call that help us flesh out what the call of God looks like in our lives.

### **God's Call Comes Surprisingly**

One thing I notice is God's call came surprisingly and suddenly. I have no doubt Elisha was one of those 7,000 who'd not bowed down to Baal, but he wasn't a priest. He wasn't in school getting his Ph.D. in prophecy. He was a farmer! He was a working man with callouses on his hands. But he shouldn't have been surprised, and neither should we. Moses was herding sheep when God called him, and so was King David. Gideon was threshing wheat when God called him. James and John were running a commercial fishing business.

There's a principle in Scripture that when we're faithful in small things God will put us in charge of greater things (Matthew 25:23). All of these people I just mentioned were faithful in small things. Years ago a young Italian man took a walk through the country. He decided to step into a chapel to pray. In the middle of his prayer, he heard Christ speak to him: "Go and repair my house." This was in the 1200's and many of the churches were neglected. This one was in disrepair; the walls were crumbling; the priest who served there didn't even have enough money to buy oil for the lamps. The guy was stunned. He'd never experienced God speaking to him. He vowed to carry out the command. He found masonry, mortar, trowels, and other supplies, and began repairing the church he'd been praying in. The surprising thing is he later became a key figure in the revival of

the church all over Europe. The church was racked with moral corruption from the pope to the local priest. At least for a time, he was able to stem the tide of that. We know him today as St. Francis. His great work of reform started with repairing the little chapel right in front of him. A lot of times we wish we could change the world, but so often that just starts with doing the simple thing right in front of us. Those faithful in small things will be entrusted with greater things.

I'm sure Elisha had no idea what this day would bring when he woke and headed for another day of work. But in a few hours the entire trajectory of his life would be altered. Of course, the call of God may be a surprise to us but it's not to God. Remember, God had disclosed to Elijah at Mt. Sinai his decision to make Elisha his successor. God had decided all of this before Elisha had the faintest idea he'd ever do anything but run the family farm, but God was preparing him. It just reminds us God has the right to interrupt our lives at any time. Do you give God that right? What would it take for him to call you out of what you're doing?

### **God's Call Comes Severely**

Another thing I notice is God's call came severely. What I mean by that is he had to sever ties. He had to make a severe break with his past. He had to do this first in relationship to his parents. He asks permission to kiss his father and mother good-bye. He knew going after Elijah would change his relationship with them forever.

It reminds me of the guy who came up to Jesus one day and said, *"I will follow You, Lord; but first permit me to say good-bye to those at home."* To him, Jesus said, *"No one, after putting his hand to the plow and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God"* (Luke 9:61-62). Why does Jesus seem to imply it was wrong for this guy to go back and say good-bye to his parents when it seemed to be okay for Elisha to do that? The answer is that God knows our heart, and what's in our heart matters most. The issue isn't if you should say good-bye, the issue is where your loyalty and highest affection lies. Elisha put following God's call before pleasing his parents. Don't get me wrong, we should honor our parents, but God comes first. When I told my parents what God was calling me to do, they looked at each other and said, "Where did we go wrong?" They not only tried to talk me out of it, they tried to talk my fiancé out of marrying me! Fortunately for me she didn't listen to them. This reminds me also that as a parent, we don't have the right to dictate where our adult children live or what they do for a living. We should want them to follow God's call on their lives.

Elisha also had to sever ties with his money. His family owned twelve pairs of oxen and that strongly suggests a comfortable level of wealth. Jesus said, *"No servant can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be devoted to one and despise the other."* Then he added, *"You cannot*

*serve both God and money"* (Luke 16:13). It's impossible to serve God and money at the same time because there's only room in your heart for one consuming passion. You've heard of the rich young ruler. Jesus told him to sell everything he owned and give the proceeds to the poor and then follow him. The young man was sad and walked away and we never hear about him again. Jesus doesn't call everyone to do that, but he does call everyone to be willing to do that. Again, it's an issue of the heart.

Do you know what the sign and symbol is we're severing ties with everyone and everything that would hold us back from following Christ? It's baptism. Some of you haven't yet been baptized, even though you've trusted Christ. There are many reasons why people hesitate to be baptized—concern for what others will think, even what their family will think; fear of going under the water; a reluctance to be up in front of a group of people. No pressure, but we do have a baptism coming up on Easter. You see, there's a reason Jesus gave us this practice. Baptism is a stake in the ground. It's a way of publicly burning our boats, of symbolically destroying our way of retreat. It's a way of solidifying our commitment to Christ so we'll be less likely to turn aside from following Him when the going gets tough. In baptism, we proclaim to the whole world, once and for all, "I'm a Christ follower!" Jesus commands us to be baptized for the same reason Cortez ordered his ships to be burned. It helps us to sever ties and stay the course.

### **God's Call Encompasses Service to Others**

The last thing I notice is God's call encompasses service to others. When God's call came, it was a call to serve. Verse 21 says, *"Then he set out to follow Elijah and became his servant."* Wait a minute! I thought he was called to be a prophet? Well, he was called to be a prophet, but he had to start out as someone else's servant.

A few years later after Elijah was gone, King Jehoshaphat was looking for a prophet of the Lord. One of his officers answered, *"Elisha son of Shaphat is here. He used to pour water on the hands of Elijah"* (2 Kings 3:11). I love that. First he plowed fields. Then God called him, and what did he do? Write books and speak at prophecy conferences? No. He washed his master's hands. He was a servant. I'm sure he wondered, "How long am I going to do this? When will I get the recognition I deserve? When will I lead a big ministry? When will someone wash my hands?"

Steve Farrar writes about how he learned this as a father, "We're all selfish. Selfish to the core. God sometimes chooses to deal with our selfishness by giving us someone to care for who is infinitely more selfish than us. Babies are not only the cutest creatures on the face of the earth, but they are by far the most selfish... The way God deals with my own selfishness is by giving me someone to serve who has zero interest in serving me.... Not too many people in the world can out-selfish me one on one. But

every time we've had a baby, I've met my match. Each of my kids resembled me. That meant that somebody in the family would have to grow up. Guess who was nominated?"

I was watching this show on public TV the other night called, *Happy*. It was a study of what makes people happy. They went all over the world and studied happiness from a physiological, social, spiritual and psychological perspective. I didn't buy into most of their conclusions but one thing they kept discovering stood out to me. The happiest people on earth are those who give themselves in service to others; those who have something bigger than themselves to live for. I was thinking about that and it struck me I could have saved them a lot of time. I could have just pointed them to what Jesus said, "***It is more blessed to give than to receive***" (Acts 20:35).

So God calls all of us to serve him wholeheartedly. Nothing can get in the way of following him. Some, like Elisha, are called to leave the farm. Others, like Wendell Berry are called to stay there. It's not always a matter of where you go, but of who you're following.

In his book *Pursuing Justice*, Ken Wystma tells the story of an African Christian leader who has spent the last 15 years helping some of the most vulnerable people in the world. He was born and raised in what is one of the most war-torn regions on the

globe today—eastern Congo. His life is regularly threatened, and he faces the seemingly impossible task of trying to restore villages decimated by rape, murder, and plunder. Some visiting executives from a large, well-known global relief organization once toured the region. They noticed what an effective job he was doing, and offered him a position as the leader of their Congo operations. On paper it was the kind of offer you can't refuse—higher pay, more security, great influence—a dream promotion for most Westerners. But he refused for a simple reason: "God gave me the job I have, he's helped me build the relationships and the respect I have. He's opened the door for me all these years and kept me safe on every trip out into the bush. I'm right where God has called me to be, so why would I go anywhere else? I don't just want to do good. I want to be where God wants me to be."

Like Elijah, God may call you to leave the farm, or like Wendell Berry he may call you to stay. Either way, this text is challenging us to live the kind of lives where we can say with him, "I don't just want to do good. I want to be where God wants me to be."

*This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.*

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