

Jesus has set his face to go to Jerusalem, the place where prophets die. James and his brother John have gone ahead to find lodging for the night as they continue their travel through Samaria. Now, while the Samaritans have not received Jesus, it is actually James and John who seem to have lost the plot. “Do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?” they ask. Questions like that may be exactly why Jesus nicknamed these two brothers the “Sons of Thunder.”

The boys must remember their history. They surely knew the story just before the reading from 2 Kings that we heard this morning, where Elijah called fire down on two of the Samaritan King Ahaziah’s captains and 100 of his men. That seems reason enough for the Samaritans to choose not to receive a group of Israelites traveling to Jerusalem.

What the Sons of Thunder seem to have *forgotten* is that Jesus has told them that when they experience non-reception or outright rejection, that they should just shake the dust from their feet and move on. Jesus did not come to destroy anyone, but to reconcile all people to God. Jesus has set his face to go to Jerusalem, not to be side-tracked in Samaria. Luke’s Jesus has set his face to go to Jerusalem where, *from the cross*, he will forgive those responsible for his execution.

For James and John to even consider invoking divine retribution upon the Samaritans means they are still entertaining a perspective that is counter to everything Jesus has taught—everything Jesus *lived*—in their presence. Just before our reading, John told Jesus about someone casting out demons in the name of Jesus whom they told to stop “because,” John said, “he does not follow with us.” The Sons of Thunder, in their enthusiasm, are missing the point that God’s limitless love is fed by forgiveness and reconciliation, not by punishment or the “right kind” of membership, whatever that means.

Clearly, the Gospel perspective that Jesus embodies is not a simple view to adopt. Because if James and John are struggling—James and John who walked beside Jesus and who were the only people besides Peter who saw the Transfiguration—if *these two* so readily missed the point, imagine the mischief that you and I can get into. Without encounters with God that return

our attention to the Gospel message—without reminders from those following Jesus, who is God’s perfect love made human—our misinterpretations can become malicious.

Just days ago, a pastor from Texas said that not only was he *glad* that 49 people were killed at the Pulse club in Orlando, but that he was praying that survivors of the terror attack would also die. He was speaking in support of another pastor from California who stood in the pulpit only hours after the murders and said, “The tragedy is that more of them didn’t die. I will pray to God like I did this morning and I will do it tonight that God will finish the job.” This is a man who was ordained by the Arizona preacher who said in 2009 that he hated Barack Obama and prayed for him to die and go to hell¹.

Those are misinterpretations that have hardened into evil.

Preachers from all denominations will be delivering sermons this morning that talk about how difficult it is to be a Christian. And it *is* difficult. It is difficult to remember that to follow Jesus Christ *never* involves calling fire or death of any kind down on other people. “The only thing that matters,” Paul wrote to the Galatians in a part of our reading left out of the lectionary, “The *only thing that matters* is faith expressing itself in love.” We heard Paul say that the summary of Holy Scripture is to love your neighbor as yourself, almost a direct quote from Jesus who knew it from Leviticus.

It is difficult to be a Christian, to keep your eye on the only thing that matters as you travel. So let me give you a driving pointer that comes, appropriately enough, from the world of NASCAR. The mental complexities of racing have led many NASCAR and Indy Car teams to hire psychologists to work with their drivers. Now, when you are driving a car around a track at ridiculous speeds, skids can happen. And so one of the basics that sports psychologists teach drivers is that when your car goes into a skid, you must turn your eyes to where you want to go, not toward the rapidly approaching wall. If you have put in your hours of practice, your body will begin to steer you toward where you *want* to go—toward life, instead of where you *don’t* want to go—toward death.

¹ As reported in the Washington Post, June 15th, 2016.

Keeping our eyes on the in-breaking reign of God's love is essential and yet that is the very thing that is difficult about being a Christian. Especially when there are other, more vocal, Christians who have appear to have gone off the track. It's no wonder that people who aren't Christian can't quite figure us out.

There's a Zen story about a horse and rider. The horse is galloping so fast that it looks as though the rider must be going somewhere very important. A person standing alongside the road sees them and shouts, "Where are you going?" to which the rider replies, "I don't know! Ask the horse!"

You see, the world standing along the road we travel needs for you and me to be clear about destination toward which *we* have set *our* faces. There are far too many versions of Christianity for people to sort out, and we may be the only encounter people have with a Christianity that liberates, rather than one that obliterates.

Now then, let me tell you another story: A monk walking on along a road is met by a soldier who draws his sword and says "Stop!" "What do you want?" asks the monk. "Who are you? What are you doing? Where are you going?" says the soldier. "How much are you paid to ask these questions?" replies the monk. "I am paid a denarius each day," says the soldier. The monk nods thoughtfully and says, "I will pay you two denarii every day that you meet me and make me answer those three questions."

We are followers of Christ. That's who we are. Specifically, we are Episcopalians, which is just a way of being Christian in the world. What we are doing, when we are at our best, is restoring people, *all* people, to unity with God and each other in Christ. We do that by praying and worshiping, proclaiming the Gospel, and promoting justice, peace and love. We, all of us, clergy and lay-people, set our faces toward the in-breaking of the kingdom of God and toward that kingdom, we walk.

Each of us has ministries—gifts God has given to us so that we can go out and represent Christ and the Church, embodying God's love for the world wherever we may be and carrying on Christ's work of reconciliation in the world. Many of us also have ministries in the life, worship and governance of the church herself.

We follow Jesus together, and yet each of us has a unique path to walk. In our reading from Luke, Jesus responds to different people in ways that seek to liberate each of them differently. To one who seeks to follow wherever Jesus goes, Jesus provokes the follower to notice that if Christ has nowhere to go, then there is no “other” place that the follower must be but right here, right now. To another, Jesus says, “Follow me.” But for that person, to “follow” is to “go.” To go toward life even in the process of a parent dying. “Go and proclaim the kingdom of God.” Still another says, “I will follow, but let me first say farewell.” To that one, Jesus answers: “No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.”

Now, I want you to hear Jesus speaking from a love so deep, so inclusive and radical that it defies our imagination. We move toward where our awareness is focused. We can focus our awareness on fear and divisiveness, and maintaining systems that serve to enslave or dominate. Or we can put a hand to the plow and keep our awareness focused on life. If we insist on dominating others, if we are fixated on fear, *we have made ourselves* unfit for the kingdom.

Fortunately for all of us, God’s love is a forgiving love; a unifying love. Jesus does not mean that those looking back at death are forever *unsuitable*—just not the right shape, temperament or type. When we have made ourselves not fit for God’s kingdom, the Greek implies that we are not fit in the sense of being “not well-placed” or “not ready for use.”

When we *are* ready—refocused and reconciled—we can tell that we are plowing a straighter line by what is happening within us and around us as a consequence of our actions. Are we cultivating jealousy, anger and quarrels? Dissensions, factions and envy? Or are we nurturing love and joy and peace? Patience, kindness and generosity? Faithfulness, gentleness, self-control?

Start new every day. Live by the guidance of God’s loving Spirit and be made ready for use.

The world needs you.