

**June 30, 2019 Third Sunday after Pentecost**  
**Pastor Carolyn Albert Donovan**  
**Peace Lutheran Church – Austin, Texas**

**GOSPEL**

**Luke 9:51-62**

The holy gospel according to Saint Luke, the ninth chapter.

**Glory to you, O Lord.**

<sup>51</sup>When the days drew near for [Jesus] to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem. <sup>52</sup>And he sent messengers ahead of him. On their way they entered a village of the Samaritans to make ready for him; <sup>53</sup>but they did not receive him, because his face was set toward Jerusalem. <sup>54</sup>When his disciples James and John saw it, they said, “Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?” <sup>55</sup>But he turned and rebuked them. <sup>56</sup>Then they went on to another village.

<sup>57</sup>As they were going along the road, someone said to him, “I will follow you wherever you go.” <sup>58</sup>And Jesus said to him, “Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.” <sup>59</sup>To another he said, “Follow me.” But he said, “Lord, first let me go and bury my father.” <sup>60</sup>But Jesus said to him, “Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God.” <sup>61</sup>Another said, “I will follow you, Lord; but let me first say farewell to those at my home.” <sup>62</sup>Jesus said to him, “No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.”

The gospel of the Lord.

**Praise to you, O Christ.**

Some of my favorite heroes of fiction are kind of anti-heroes...or at least reluctant ones...imperfect ones.

One of them is named Ford Prefect...for reasons that don't bear explaining right now. Ford, it happens, is an alien from a small planet in the vicinity of Betelgeuse...The most important thing you need to know about him if you don't know about him already is that he really likes to have a good time...but

somehow keeps getting caught up in saving the Universe instead. At one point, resisting yet another universe-saving caper...he whines to the friends trying to convince him to help, "My doctor says that I have a malformed public-duty gland and a natural deficiency in moral fiber and that I am therefore excused from saving universes." It doesn't work of course...and he gets sucked into all sorts of moral-fiber-and-public-duty-filled work. It's almost as if he's meant to be a good guy in spite of himself.

I think of the disciples kind of like that. And Jesus I think maybe does too...but it also seems he still gets sort of stunned into silence at their more-human-than-hero moments. This scene in Samaria is great because there are so many blanks our imaginations can fill in...Messengers have gone ahead into a Samaritan town where Jesus plans to stay. Yet, Luke has said, "his face is set toward Jerusalem." His unwavering purpose now is to move toward the completion of his work. And Samaritans don't particularly care for Jerusalem...because it is the place where the Jewish people insist they should worship instead of where they do...It is the place that...because they do not worship there, they are rejected by the Jewish people of that time. And the feeling is mutual.

I would make a joke here about the local controversies about the proper places of worship...whether it is in Austin or College Station...if it weren't so much more serious than that. But imagine that thing which makes some people reject others out of hand...before they know them...whether it is sexual orientation...immigration status...or political party affiliation...

The Samaritans knew that Jesus was focused on Jerusalem...so they didn't want to hear from him. He wasn't one of them.

And here's where James and John do their shtick. "Lord, should we call down fire from heaven? Should we burn this mother down? That'd show 'em!"

And all it says is that Jesus turned and rebuked them. It doesn't say what he said. I can imagine him turning and saying, "Really? What is *wrong* with you?" Maybe he said something more poised and eloquent than that.

But...then...the text doesn't actually say that he spoke at all...just that he rebuked them...and I don't know about you...but I've been rebuked with a silence that brought cold fear into my heart more than any words. Jesus *might* have had words for the disciples...but he might also just have had A Look...You know the kind of Look I mean. The Don't-You-Say-Another-Word-About-Great-Aunt-Kitty's-Horrible-Canned-Ham-At-This-Dinner-Table-Eat-This-Food-And-Like-It-Or-Else kind of look. You know that look? Right?

Either way...no fire rained down from heaven that night. It's much less dramatic than that. All that happens after the Samaritans reject Jesus is that he does what he did last week in the country of the Gerasenes. They didn't want him to be there...so he left. Sometimes, it's ok to just walk away from the places you are unwelcome. Even Jesus did it.

The Samaritans saw in Jesus a person from another place, with different values, whose very presence carried a weight of judgment and even threat. He embodied the "other." And that's a kind of chicken-and-egg situation. Did they resent him because they felt bothered by his presence, by their experience of people he was associated with? Or were they the ones doing the othering? It can be hard to untangle once the cycle of division starts churning.

Who are the others whose presence makes us feel called into question? Who do we other? What other cultures or values keep us separated from each other...make us treat each other as less valuable...maybe so inhuman that we could suggest flippantly that a whole group of people is worthy of destruction...like James and John did?

We laugh at how silly they sound. But is it that much different to say, "Why don't we call down fire to burn their home to the ground," than it is to say, "Why don't we keep their children in crowded and dirty camps...so that no matter how desperate they are where they come from, they will think coming here is worse and they will stay away?"

We do these things to each other all the time. Did then. Still do now. And I can't even imagine words strong enough for Jesus to rebuke us when we do these things. Maybe there are no words. Maybe it's just a look...maybe a glare...maybe broken-hearted, tear-filled disappointment...

And you see...when it comes to Jesus...all of humanity is Samaria. Because as much as we don't understand each other...reject each other...see each other as too different or strange or wrong to be allowed...we understand Jesus even less...and reject him even more. The kin-dom of heaven is a foreign country...and we don't know how to accept people from there most of the time.

We are all Samaritans.

But the good news about Samaritans is – wrong as they may be...they still somehow do the work of the kin-dom. Jesus tells a parable about a Samaritan...a sort of anti-hero...who you would never guess has the sense of moral fiber and public duty that would lead him to take care of a man who'd been beaten, robbed and left for dead...but he does...and the real heroes...the man's real family (supposedly) walked right by.

It reminds me of a meme...maybe you've seen it online. It says something like this:

“THE BIBLE IS CLEAR: Moabites are bad. They were not to be allowed to dwell among God's people (Dt. 23).

BUT THEN comes the story of “Ruth the Moabite,” which challenges the prejudice against Moabites.

THE BIBLE IS CLEAR: People from Uz are evil (Jer. 25).

BUT THEN comes the story of Job, a man from Uz who was the “most blameless man on earth.”

THE BIBLE IS CLEAR: No foreigners or eunuchs allowed (Dt. 23).

BUT THEN comes the story of an African eunuch welcomed into the church (Acts 8).

THE BIBLE IS CLEAR: God's people hated Samaritans.

BUT THEN Jesus tells a story that shows a Samaritan who is better than the people of God.

THE STORY MAY BEGIN with prejudice, discrimination, & animosity, but the Spirit moves God's people towards openness, welcome, inclusion, acceptance & affirmation."

This is why I don't mind the end of this gospel reading so much...Jesus answers a whole group of enthusiastic people who have come out to follow him by saying how hard it will be...how his followers can never rest...will never really get where they are going...can never have their old lives again...not even for a minute...and he says, "No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God."

The Bible is clear. No denying it. We know ourselves...We might as well have eyes in the back of our heads, we look backward so much. We are not fit to be part of the kingdom. But then Jesus comes to claim us and show us who we really are...to make us a part of it anyway.

The good news is that you are not disqualified from being a part of the kingdom of heaven. *We* are not disqualified...And neither are we exempt from doing its work.

We might find we have more moral fiber and a stronger sense of public duty than we thought. We might find that even though we keep forgetting how God really works, Jesus keeps calling us to come and follow anyway. We might even realize one day that, in spite of ourselves, we are in the middle of the work of saving the universe.

Let us go out in faith and hope that this is true...Let us go out and live as part of that kind of kingdom.

Amen.