

Covenant Presbyterian Church

“No Turning Back” Luke 9:51-62

Jeff Fox-Kline June 30, 2019

When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem. ⁵² And he sent messengers ahead of him. On their way they entered a village of the Samaritans to make ready for him; ⁵³ but they did not receive him, because his face was set toward Jerusalem. ⁵⁴ 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?”^[k] ⁵⁵ But he turned and rebuked them. ⁵⁶ Then^[l] they went on to another village.

⁵⁷ As they were going along the road, someone said to him, “I will follow you wherever you go.” ⁵⁸ 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.” ⁵⁹ To another he said, “Follow me.” But he said, “Lord, first let me go and bury my father.” ⁶⁰ But Jesus^[m] said to him, “Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God.” ⁶¹ Another said, “I will follow you, Lord; but let me first say farewell to those at my home.” ⁶² Jesus said to him, “No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.”

I’ve never had a nickname. I don’t know why, but no one has ever given me a nickname that has lasted for more than couple days. Which is fine, I don’t need a nickname necessarily, but nicknames can be really cool. Thomas Edison was the Wizard of Menlo Park, Wilt “the Stilt” Chamberlin, Charlie Chaplin was the Little Tramp. Those nicknames are neat and all, but today we heard a story from two of the people with all-time historically great nicknames. Jesus and the disciples were

on their way to Jerusalem and tried to stay the night in a Samaritan village. When the village said no, James and John asked Jesus if it was cool for them to call down fire to destroy the village. These two disciples, James and John, are identified in the gospel of Mark as “the Sons of Thunder”, and while no one truly knows why they were called the Sons of Thunder, scholars point to this story as a possible reason why. I will say, without equivocation, that Sons of Thunder is one of the coolest nicknames imaginable.

Nicknames aside, what’s happening in this story? It really raises some questions for me. Did the Samaritan village really merit fire raining down on it? Why wouldn’t the Samaritans welcome Jesus? What did Jesus rebuke mean to the disciples?

Samaritans and Jews did not get along. Differences in beliefs led to a deep and abiding enmity between the two peoples. It makes sense, then, that the Samaritans in the town would refuse Jesus presence among them. Ancient and deep-seeded prejudices will obviously produce a lack of hospitality. But there’s a second possibility for why they refused to let Jesus lodge with them. The clue comes in verse 53 “but they did not receive him, because his face was set toward Jerusalem”. Notice that it gives an explicit reason for them refusing him. Biblical scholar Justo Gonzalez sees this refusal to be an act of political cowardice. He says “If this is simply a reference to where he was going, then what we have here is a mere instance of anti-Jewish Samaritan feeling, in which case it would have sufficed for Luke to say that they did not receive them because they were Jews”. Gonzalez sees the phrase “his face was set towards Jerusalem”, a phrase that occurs twice in the passage we read, as a proverbial throwing down of the gauntlet against power. Setting his face towards Jerusalem is a drive to challenge the political and social structures and upset the power structures in place. In light of this reading, the refusal to host Jesus was a fear of reprisal from the ruling authority.

So we have two possible reasons why the village may have refused Jesus. In one case, it is a question of bias and prejudice, something that echoes throughout human history as one of our core sins. In another case, it is a question of cowardice and fear, something that happens when people of good conscience can't stir themselves to stand for what is right.

So what is James and John's response? They ask permission to call down fire on the entire village. Whoa. That's... a lot to ask. What could have them so rankled? Were they angry at the village's refusal to host a controversial figure and wanted to destroy them for their cowardice? Were they angry at the historic bias against their people and wanted to destroy them for their prejudices? Maybe it was a case of their own prejudices leading them to want any excuse to rain fire down on their ancient enemies.

James and John wanted to call down fire on the Samaritans. That is an incredibly human response to the frustrations and roadblocks that were thrown up into their path. What is more satisfying than seeing our enemies come to ruin? The satisfaction of dominating your opponent so thoroughly that nothing is left but cinders. But Jesus rebukes them. That's all it says, he turned and rebuked them, and then they all went to another village. Nothing said about why, or why not to rain fire, just a simple no and they move on.

This rebuke challenges our human impulses for retribution and vindication in the face of slights and attacks. Revenge is a natural human instinct, one that is tempting when other avenues seem closed to us. But Jesus does not call us towards revenge. The rebuke of Jesus shows clearly that the impulse for violence and retribution is one to be avoided, to be passed by. But it's also one that we face in our everyday lives. On a national level there was recently a question of what to do with the American drone that was shot down by Iran. There were voices that said the proper response to that provocation was to rain down fire, but ultimately the decision was against violent retribution. But still the desire for

vengeance is strong. This week we've been told of the deplorable conditions of children being imprisoned in our country. Stories of children being forced to care for toddlers. Children being denied basic necessities such as toothbrushes and diapers. When I first heard of this, I was paralyzed with grief. But that grief led to anger – a desire for some sort of retribution for the inhumanity witnessed this past week. But I know that vengeance is not an option. This desire for vengeance wends its way through the public sphere and into our personal lives as well. The boss who doesn't respect the work that we do. The friend who feels the need to be in competition with you. The classmate who bullies your friends at school. There are people in our lives with whom we desire vengeance. Which is normal! The disciples did it, we do it, it is a human trait. But it is not the trait that Jesus calls us to cultivate. Look at the way he dismissed the request by James and John. A rebuke and move on.

It's a difficult thing to put that desire aside. But we look back to what Jesus was doing. He had set his face towards Jerusalem. This is not just a geographic indicator of where he was walking. In fact, if you read about Jesus journey to Jerusalem in Luke, you'd realize he took a wildly circuitous route to get there. So when we say that Jesus set his face towards Jerusalem, we need to read it in terms of what he was trying to do, rather than where he was trying to go. This journey to Jerusalem came after the transfiguration, after his foretelling of his death and resurrection. His journey to Jerusalem is to create one of the greatest political, social, and cultural upheavals in human history – it is leading to his death and resurrection, God's victory over the grave, and the declaration that the power of good will reign triumphant over the powers of sin and death. So when Jesus rebukes his disciples, it isn't because their desire for vengeance is unjustified, just small in the face of what he was doing.

His journey to Jerusalem ends with the promise of God's kingdom, of the triumph of life. Jesus journey to Jerusalem promises the end to the kind of suffering of

bias and moral cowardice that afflicted the Samaritans in that village. This is the call towards discipleship that we all find ourselves pulled towards. In the face of retribution, Jesus tells us to follow him, to witness a different way, to see justice not enacted in vengeance, but rather in love. In looking to Jesus, we see the way of nonviolence, of love, of power shown in a distinct lack of violence. Justice is not vengeance, but God's triumph. By passing by the village, Jesus did not say "they will not see justice", but rather "now is not the time, and that is not the method".

By pushing past our instinct for vengeance we are following the difficult path of discipleship that Jesus lays out for us. As we read earlier, discipleship is a radical and fraught path. Listen to what Jesus says to those who wish to follow him: "The son of man has nowhere to lay his head", "Let the dead bury their own dead", "no one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God". These are the impossible tasks that Jesus sets out before us. The impossible path of discipleship. To be a disciple, Jesus tells us, is to leave everything behind – our homes, our families, even the opportunity to bury our loved ones. This is harsh and uncompromising rhetoric that lays out the inherent difference that Jesus insists we live in to. In Christian history this passage has been used as a way to encourage an ascetic lifestyle, monks without homes, living lives of simplicity. But in my mind, this calling to discipleship does not lead towards asceticism, but towards radical living. It means dying to the attachments that keep us from more closely following the man we call our savior. It means turning away from our attachment to violence, to hatred, to sin. This is a less gratifying path in the short term, but in the long term it is a path towards a better and holier world. Perhaps no Christian has exemplified this more completely than Martin Luther King. Speaking on eschewing violence in favor of a more difficult discipleship he says "I am convinced that if we succumb to the temptation to use violence in our struggle for freedom, unborn generations will be the recipients of a long and

desolate night of bitterness, and our chief legacy to them will be a never-ending reign of chaos”.

But central to King’s refusal of violence, was his insistence on a faithful, costly discipleship. Martin Luther King protested the injustice of his time at great cost. Let the dead bury their dead, no looking back. This doesn’t mean that he did, or that we should, abandon the world in favor of some spiritual awakening, but rather that we need to embed ourselves in the world to bring about a spiritual awakening in society. When faced with the enormity of injustice in the world we are not called towards violence, or towards retreat, but called instead to a deep, costly engagement with the evil and sin in this world. When we see a picture of a man and his daughter washed up on the Rio Grande, Jesus isn’t telling us that the dead should bury them, but rather that faithful obedience to him leads us to seeking justice for their lives. When we see injustice in our lives, in our workplaces, even in our families then our obedience to Jesus needs to insist on our intervention even at the cost of our own security. But Jesus call towards discipleship is also one that encourages repentance and love. To risk our relationships, our security and our comfort in following Jesus means that our methods leave the door open to reconciliation. Hard words spoken in love are fundamentally grounded in love, which is a true reconciling force. Think about the Samaritan village; should the disciples have rained fire then there would have been no chance for repentance. But by avoiding violence, Christ’s love has the opportunity to overcome the bias or moral cowardice. Once again, Dr. King shows us this faith in action: “the nonviolent approach does something to hearts and souls of those committed to it. It gives them new self-respect. It calls up resources of strength and courage that they did not know they had. Finally, it so stirs the conscience of the opponent that reconciliation becomes a reality”.

Christ’s call to discipleship means that we can no longer look back on our old way of life. On our old solutions to the world’s problems. But it opens us up to the

possibilities of new ways of pursuing justice, it guides us towards a radical love that challenges power, that stands up to sin, that greets each injustice as a force to be dismantled and rebuilt. Because love disarms, love dismantles, and love rebuilds.