

## Lectionary 13C — 3rd Sunday after Pentecost — June 30, 2019

Luke 9:51-62

By the time of Jesus, Jews and Samaritans had been estranged cousins for almost 700 years. They were ancient enemies, the animosities, stereotypes, and misunderstandings passed down by both sides from generation to generation.

Why wouldn't the Samaritans receive Jesus in their village as he passes by on his way to Jerusalem? Well, for lots of reasons, the most basic being that he is a Jew and they are Samaritans, and Jews and Samaritans do not like each other, fraternize together, show hospitality to each other, or try very hard to understand one another. Then there's the fact that his face is set toward Jerusalem, the holy city for Jews, but for Samaritans a rival to Mount Gerizim, the proper place of worship. In other words, their lack of hospitality is a long and complicated story. Suffice it to say that it would have been much more of a shock if the Samaritans *had* welcomed Jesus.

What shocks me most about the story, though, is the response of the disciples James and John. In response to this perceived affront to their teacher, their immediate desire is to rain down fire from heaven to destroy the Samaritans. Make no mistake, they are talking about the kind of fire from heaven that turned Sodom and Gomorrah to dust. They are talking about the total destruction of this village—every last man, woman, child, and animal. And most shocking of all, they voice this murderous desire as disciples of Jesus.

How can this be? How can their hearts be filled with such anger and hatred after the time they have walked with Jesus? After they have sat at his feet and listened to him teach? After they have witnessed Jesus heal the sick, the troubled, the broken with such great compassion? After they have observed their master eat with sinners, tax collectors, prostitutes, and other outsiders and outcasts? How can James and John of all people, members of the inner circle of Jesus' followers, not get it, not understand the way of radical love and gracious mercy that Jesus came to enact?

It is a great puzzle, a truly discouraging moment, to see this utter failure of discipleship, from disciples who should know better. I am shocked, disappointed, and appalled by their willingness to resort so quickly to violence against their perceived enemy.

I guess maybe I'm more disappointed than shocked, really, because the tendency of James and John is the tendency we see reflected every day in the news — the tendency to demonize and dehumanize those who are different from us, those with whom we disagree, those whom we perceive as enemies. Perhaps our inclination is not as extreme as James' and John's. We merely belittle our opponents, stereotype those who are different from us, trumpet our virtue over those who disagree with us, our moral superiority over those who are less enlightened. We may not go so far as calling down fire on our enemies, but we are increasingly quick to draw a line between who's in and who's out, who's right and who's wrong, who's for us and who's against us. It seems increasingly common to see those who are different as less than human, or at least less human than me.

About nine years ago now, University of Michigan researchers completed a massive study designed to gauge the empathy of college students. It was a broad study looking at students who had enrolled since the year 2000 (so about a decade's worth of data) and found that these students had empathy levels 40% lower than previous generations. Some felt that this confirmed the emergence of a "narcissism epidemic" in our culture. Others blamed modern parenting techniques for failing to teach empathy to children.

Whatever the cause, a decline in the ability of young adults to empathize with others—to see another person's perspective and sympathize with their feelings—is certainly not a positive trend. Now a decade later, I wonder if we have become more or less empathetic as a society? Is the "narcissism epidemic" growing or declining?

Most disturbing of all, though, is the degree to which I can see myself in James and John, the degree to which I can see their self-righteous anger in myself. Everyday I feel confronted by something that honestly makes me angry. I'm 54 years old and cannot remember a time in my life when reading the news has made me swear out loud, or slam my fist on the table, or just feel angry — almost every single day — from being bombarded with a steady stream of things that seem uncaring, unjust, shortsighted, egregiously unfair, exploitative, mean, violent, and sometimes malevolent if not outright evil. And in addition to being saddened and depressed, I am angered by it all—some days maybe angry enough to wish that fire would rain down from heaven and consume all these perceived enemies.

That's the danger in criticizing the decline in empathy in our culture. It blinds you to the ways in which your own empathy is limited. That's the danger in allowing yourself to be consumed by anger. It encourages you to see your enemies as less than human, and from there, it's a short step to treating them as less than human.

Notice that Jesus' response to James and John is to rebuke them. Whenever we wish for the destruction of our enemies, whenever we see others as less human than ourselves, Jesus rebukes us too, no matter how righteous our motivation.

And then Jesus moves on. He cannot be deterred from his journey to Jerusalem—Jerusalem where he will give his life in love for all, including the misguided James and John, and all failed disciples; for those who can't find the time to follow him, and for all who have such good excuses for dragging their feet; for all who fail in loving their neighbor, especially their enemies; for you and for me.

As the Lutheran preacher David Lose says in his weekly blog, "That's right. Empathetic or not, self-righteous or not, too busy or cool for God or not, Jesus comes for us. All of us. And if that doesn't pierce our insecurity or fear or need to be in control or numbness or privilege or whatever it might [be] that causes us to overlook the needs of others, I don't know what will. And even if it doesn't pierce through our defenses to touch, even transform, us, it's still true."

Even if we don't believe a word of it, it's still true. Jesus comes for all of us, and "all" means *all*.

Whenever we pray for fire to rain down from heaven upon our enemies, Jesus stands ready to rebuke us. But he will always support and encourage our prayer for another kind of fire from heaven, a fire that God would gladly send—the fire of Pentecost. For surely that is what we need most: a mighty blast of wind from the mouth of God to stir us; tongues of fire to descend on each one of us—the fire of the Spirit who inspires repentance, the flame of the Spirit who burns away our iniquities, the heat of the Spirit who sets our hearts on fire with love, and the light of the Spirit who enables us to see in others, no matter how different, the face of God.

Come, Holy Spirit, come! Fill the hearts of your faithful and kindle in us the fire of your love. Pierce the armor of our pride, indifference, and anger that the face of the earth may be renewed by your grace working in us and through us, for the sake of the one who gave his life for all.  
Amen

### **Works Cited**

"David Lose." <https://www.davidlose.net/>. Accessed 27 Jun. 2019.