

The Simplest Thing

Year C – Pentecost V – June 27, 2010

2 Kings 2:1-2, 6-14 – Psalm 77:1-2, 11-20 – Galatians 5:1, 13-25 – Luke 9:51-62

The entire scope and sweep of the Biblical narrative and salvation history. The preferential response of God to every rejection, the preferential response of God to every betrayal, the preferential response of God to every act of violence.

Today's reading from Luke begins the great "journey episode" in his Gospel. We begin today with the message that Jesus has *turned his face towards Jerusalem*. Everything that we encounter from this point forward in Luke's gospel must be understood in this light: Jesus has set his face towards Jerusalem.

- Towards confrontation with the powers and principalities of his age.
- Towards betrayal and abandonment by his closest friends.
- Towards mock justice and a sham trial.
- Towards the cross and an excruciatingly painful death.
- And finally, towards an empty tomb.

It is no wonder that today's reading ends with three lessons regarding the cost of discipleship, and an admonition to not look back once your hand has been set to the plow. Between now and the first Sunday in Advent we will have

many opportunities to reflect on the cost of discipleship, as Luke presents his story about this journey.

For this morning, we are going to spend just a few minutes with the disciples and with the Samaritans. Not so much, today, about the *cost* of discipleship, as about the *behavior* of discipleship. How does a disciple behave?

Luke is a master storyteller. Following the baptism of Jesus at the beginning of his ministry, we are told that he is rejected by the people in his hometown of Nazareth.

Today's episode follows closely after the Transfiguration, the second significant validation of the life, ministry, and destiny of Jesus. Yet again – following this affirmation by God of his ministry – Jesus next encounters rejection. This time, at the hands of a Samaritan village.

Luke could not have chosen a more striking parallel to Nazareth than a Samaritan village. To the Hebrew people in the days of Jesus, the Greeks, the Romans – and the Persians and the Egyptians before them – were bad enough. But the Samaritans were obnoxious in an entirely different way.

Samaritans weren't pagans, they were worse. They were guilty of rejecting tradition as interpreted by the mainstream religious authorities. They had their own understanding of scripture.

They used the five books of Moses as their law – just as did the Jews. They simply believed that the Hebrews had gotten off track – along

about the time of the Davidic monarchy. And perhaps most telling in regards to explaining why the Jews hated them so very much - they did not yield allegiance to the Temple in Jerusalem, or to the priestly hierarchy who ruled there.

Thomas Cahill says this in his book *Desire of the Everlasting Hills*:

*"There is no hatred so intense as odium theologicum – hatred for those nearby who are religiously similar to oneself but nonetheless different. Through the ages, Christians, for instance, have been far more hateful to Jews and Muslims, and to one another, than they have ever been to Buddhists and Hindus. The Samaritans were the neighborhood heretics; and for them the Jews reserved a contempt they did not display even toward gentiles."*ⁱ

I have to confess to the sin of *Odium theologicum*: I love to share any news or juicy gossip that I might have about 'those other' Episcopalians or Anglicans with whom I don't agree on some point of church politics, or scripture, or tradition, or reason. *Odium theologicum* is probably the overriding sin in the Anglican church today.

Back to the gospel story. So why, why, why - after we are told that Jesus has set his face towards Jerusalem – does Luke have him attempt to go to those blasted Samaritans? It was probably to teach the disciples – and perhaps especially us – a lesson about how it is that a disciple is supposed to behave.

When the Samaritans let it be known to the disciples that they and Jesus would not be welcome in their village, our old friends James and John had a ready solution.

Fire from heaven. What we might call today 'shock and awe.'

Fire from heaven. What – in the name of God – and I don't use that phrase lightly – what in the name of God did they think heaven was all about? They had just been on the Mount of Transfiguration. What did they think heaven was all about?

Calvin Theological Seminary in Grand Rapids, Michigan has this to say about the disciples' response to the rejection they experienced:

*"Just what did James and John think heaven contained? Jesus was headed toward heaven to become the ultimate cosmic decanter of grace and mercy unto salvation. THAT is what the heavens were soon to become thanks to the gracious work of Jesus . . . James and John saw the heavenly realms as anything but gracious. Indeed, they saw it as a kind of divine arsenal to fry greasy sinners like the Samaritans."*ⁱⁱ

Well – Jesus would have none of that. The text simply says that Jesus turned and rebuked the disciples. Luke doesn't spell out why Jesus rejects the disciple's suggestion that the Samaritans be blown back into the Stone Age.

Paul, in his letter to the Galatians that we heard today, spells it out very clearly and simply. It's really the simplest thing. The entire scope and sweep of the Biblical narrative and salvation history provides us with the reason.

The preferential response of God to every rejection provides us with the reason.

The preferential response of God to every betrayal provides us with the reason.

The preferential response of God to every act of violence provides us with the reason.

Five simple words.

Love your neighbor as yourself.

We first received those words from the Book of Leviticus – one of those presumed to be horrid little books of the Hebrew Scripture that only contain arcane and now-foolish rules and regulations.

We'll hear it in two weeks from Jesus himself, when he tells us a story about – interesting enough – a certain Samaritan.

And finally, as our faith tradition has developed, we hear it today from that old rascal Paul as he writes to his friends in Galatia.

How does a disciple behave?

It's the simplest thing.

Love your neighbor as yourself.

ⁱ Thomas Cahill. *Desire of the Everlasting Hills*. Anchor (February 13, 2001).

ⁱⁱ <http://cep.calvinseminary.edu/thisWeek/index.php> Center for Excellence in Preaching