

Pentecost 6C, Proper 8. Luke 9:51-62.

I don't give titles to my sermons, but this week I was sorely tempted, because the options are so delicious. Consider, for example, "What Do You Do With a Grumpy Savior (Early in the Morning)?" Or "On When It Is Appropriate to Call Down Fire from Heaven on an Inhospitable City: a Primer." Or, in reference to Elisha's rather dramatic, oxen-barbecuing method of quitting his job as a farmer to go become a prophet: "Burn That Mother Down: the Christian Approach to Giving Two-Weeks Notice."

I hope that you can tell that I'm joking, whether I'm doing it well or not. I'm joking around this morning for two reasons. First, because at least for me it was another bad week, in personal and global terms. And I am convinced that the people who are most likely to be found in the company of the devil are the people who do not laugh, and especially those who cannot laugh at themselves. So I am decidedly of the opinion that we are under something like a spiritual obligation to laugh and especially to laugh at ourselves when our earnestness is putting us in danger of thinking that we cannot be wrong. And secondly, I think that this gospel story, especially, is funny.

Now that's not to say that there aren't serious issues involved, just as it is the case that laughter alone won't save the world anymore than fear and anger will. It's kind of a puzzling story, in two ways. Why are the disciples so cruel to what we might call soft enemies, folks who aren't actively opposing Jesus, but are also unwilling to stick their necks out for him? And right after that, why is Jesus so mean to these potential friends, who all seem well-intentioned but get really stringent rebukes?

Let's start with Jesus. The larger context here is a huge shift in Luke's narrative, as Jesus leaves his home base in Galilee for good, heading down toward Jerusalem. Please move to the edge of your seats, because it's time for a geography lesson. Galilee is way up in the North of Israel. It's where Jesus is from and where most of his ministry has been up to this part of the gospel. But in this chapter the focus shifts to Jerusalem, the ancient capital of Israel, which is way down in the South of Palestine. Jesus was always going to have to go there, and when he got there, he was always going to be killed, whether it was by public execution by the government or secret assassination by those threatened by his teaching.

And this brusqueness with would-be followers is, I think, Luke's way of signaling to us that this is getting real—it's a shift in the score music from hero's entrance to ominous, percussion-heavy rumbling. Jesus is going to Jerusalem and it's urgent and dark. There's no more time for preparation, there's no more time for long discursive teaching—it's time to gird up and get moving. His face is set to go to Jerusalem and he will not be distracted.

Except, here's the joke: after all this urgency, after all this "come now or I'm leaving without you," it takes him ten chapters to get to Jerusalem. The trip down there takes up more of Luke's narrative than Jesus' entire ministry in Galilee. From today's passage it feels like he'll be there in a couple of verses, like nothing can distract him now from the purpose he has set for himself. So what happened? What did distract him?

Nothing. No war, no natural disasters cutting off roads, no divine messages to change his plans. Nothing happens to delay him except that on the way he keeps meeting people, and where there are people, there are people in need.

Jesus could have completed his mission so quickly, if only it weren't for all these people along the way. So here's the thing about following Jesus. We have big goals, things that are the most important thing we could possibly accomplish. Our faith is without doubt all tied up in our political views, our ethical views, our economic hopes and we want what we want largely because of our faith. And these goals come to feel like they are the most important thing we could possibly do, and we shouldn't let anything distract us from them. But in the way of Jesus Christ the people in need who distract us from what we think we should be doing are, finally, the whole point.

I understand the difference between charity and structural justice. I understand the importance of ideals and big picture change, and that sacrifices have to be made along the way to a lasting justice. But Jesus' holy distraction by individual folks who need him now is a permanent imperative for the Christian life. When we let go of this, when we allow ourselves to care more about a goal or an ideal than we do for human persons, we eventually end up like James and John, committing the blasphemy of claiming infallibility. I don't think that their ridiculous suggestion that Jesus let them firebomb this Samaritan city is just a petty fit of pique. I think that it is born of a too fervent devotion to the rightness of an ideal, that has ended up missing the very point of that ideal.

"Jesus I would die for you." Good, welcome to discipleship. "Jesus I would kill for you"—ah, you've missed it completely. The reason I opened with jokes this morning was not to cheer us up after a bad week, but to remind us that we are obligated to make jokes about what we hold most dear because the greatest threat is not that our highest ideals will lose, but that we will betray them by killing for them. That we will negate Christian love by hating those who oppose it. That we will confuse God's honor with our power. Guns, sexuality, economic policy, immigration, nationalism and international cooperation. Christians must take a stand on these issues, we must set goals on these issues, but we are not permitted to deny the humanity of those who oppose us. We may not call down fire from heaven to consume our enemies. Even as we work for a better world and against those who would make the world worse, we may not pretend that God is not mysteriously working out their salvation as much as ours.

And as we labor and work and advocate and argue—I don't know how else to say it: getting distracted by the least of these is deeply holy. There is nothing on earth holier than the person in front of you, in front of me, each one bearer of the image of God. So in short, let us set our faces toward Jerusalem. Let us confront the great challenges of our time with great seriousness. And let us resist the devil with deep laughter. And let us always allow ourselves to be distracted by the people along the way, who are most often the whole point.