

When Raining Down Fire is Off the Table, Then What?

Sixth Sunday After Pentecost

June 26, 2016

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Texts: 2 Kings 2.1-2,6-14 ;
Psalm 77;
Galatians 5.1, 13-25;
Luke 9.51-62

You know those moments when you read the gospels and the disciples say something outrageous and you wonder why Jesus chose these dense and foolish followers? On a different day, I might have seen this text as one of those. But when a person full of fear and hate can walk into a gay club in the middle of Pride and open fire; when he can mow down over 100 people, killing 49 of them before the police can stop him; when common sense gun control laws that Gallup polls put at 85% popular approval cannot get enacted even after a civil rights era sit-in our senate; when the news of this massacre does not impact the rhetoric or direction of our General Synod's debate on the place of LGBT people in our denomination one day after this shooting...in my weakest, most angry moments despite knowing that it is all kinds of wrong -- I actually get why the disciples would ask Jesus: "Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?"

Jesus who had apparently mastered what some of us - what I am - still working to achieve, which is staying in your right mind, even when the world is going crazy all around you - Jesus rebuked them. So when raining down fire is off the table....then what?

That is the question I want to explore together today as we look at the Gospel and Epistle readings before us. First a piece of context, for the reaction of the disciples: they wouldn't be the first Jewish pilgrims on route to Jerusalem to receive a hostile welcome in Samaria less than a hundred and fifty years before a contingent of pilgrims were slaughtered in Samaria on their way to Jerusalem. Given that history, James and John's reaction isn't quite as shocking as it might otherwise seem. When human beings are violated on the deepest levels of soul and body - when we bump up

against the horrors of human hatred and violation – anger and outrage are not just understandable but are a normal, human reaction. And yet, Jesus said in no uncertain terms: No. Absolutely NOT. Okay. If not that then what?

Unfortunately, as our passage continues Jesus does not offer any easy answers. In fact the next piece pushes us even further. You say you want to follow me? Then forget about your comfortable home and your warm bed. You say you want to go wherever I will go? There is no time for you to attend the funeral of your father or say good bye to the ones you leave behind. It's one thing when Jesus insists we leave our vices at the door. It's hard but at least can understand it. This makes no sense at all. Love of family, loyalty. This is some of the best of what we have to offer! Why in the world would Jesus demand that we leave those things behind as well?

Fred Craddock, a professor of New Testament, once said of this passage: "The radicality of Jesus' words lies in his claim to priority over the best, not the worst, of human relationships. Jesus never said to choose him over the devil but to choose him over the family. And the remarkable thing is that those who have done so have been freed from possession and worship of family and have found the distance necessary to love them." ¹ Craddock's use of the word *possession* brought back to mind the powerful sermon that Professor Duane Loynes shared with us last Sunday. Early in his sermon about healing of the man possessed by demons, he made the observation that "the things we think we own, the very things we think we control (or possess) . . . we wake up one morning and find out that they control (or possess) us."²

Jesus isn't looking to be harsh. He isn't demanding this level of allegiance because he is some megalomaniac who needs to be more important than anyone else in your life to feed his ego. These two teachings, difficult as they are to accept let alone live out, they are gifts to us. They are intended to set us free so that we will be ruled by nothing but love.

¹ Fred Craddock, *Luke, Interpretation Commentaries*, page 144. --- I ran across this in another source and do not have all the bibliographic information on the quote.

² To read his sermon in full: http://hopechurchrca.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/061916_Duane-Loynes.pdf

I know it sounds radical, this reorienting of allegiances, that Jesus demands. It can seem scandalous even until you think about the ways that our quests to be comfortable and to have security how they have become twisted. Think about the ways that family loyalty and tribal instincts have fractured our sense of connection to one another across lines of nation, family, tribe. The instincts of tribe and family and loyalty; that was what pushed the disciples to want to reign down fire.

Paul says to us today: "It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Do not submit again to the yoke of slavery." Indignation and rage that settles into our souls and pulls us toward revenge and retaliation is one of those moments when we recognize that the very things we seek to possess and control have in fact come to possess and control us. It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Do not submit again to the yoke of slavery.

Which brings us to those lists from Galatians I was sharing with the children today. When we find ourselves recipients of the list that Paul calls the "works of the flesh," our self-protective instinct is throw those things right back. What we fail to recognize is that when we do that we get pulled into the very hatred that wounded our souls to begin with. And the longer we stay there, the more damaging to our souls it becomes.

Remember the quote Fred Rogers shared from his mother growing up? When scary things happened in the news she would always tell him to look for the helpers.³ Precisely when we are confronted by hatred, jealousy, and factions and quarreling that is when we need to look for people who are living out the fruits of the Spirit. Find the ones who are reaching out with love and offering up generosity, and who are able to remain gentle and kind when those things are alluding us in the moment.

At the Holland Pride Festival yesterday I saw the documentary called *Matt Shepherd is My Friend*. In 1998, Matthew Shepherd was a 21 year old gay college student when he was lured from a bar, robbed, viciously beaten, and tied to a fence and left to die. If you are old enough, I'm sure you remember the event. It was all over the news. The film was beautifully done, put together by his friends to tell the story of his life to place that

³ <http://www.fredrogers.org/parents/special-challenges/tragic-events.php>

horrific experience in the context of who he was and how those who loved him have moved through (are still moving through) the hurt and the anger of all that happened to him.

There are several moments in the film where can bear witness to people leaning toward the fruits of the Spirit when they could have been swallowed alive by everything Paul calls the works of the flesh -- the hatred, the fear, the anger. One moment that just about takes your breath away is hearing Matthew's father at the trial of his killer asking for mercy....asking that the death penalty be taken off the table.

The moment that will stay with me is when a priest from the University of Wyoming, Father Roger Schmit, is sitting with Matt's friend who is making the film in the present day and they are talking about the two men who killed Matthew. Father Schmit met with one of them while he was awaiting trial. Matt's friend asks whether he saw any good in his heart. And the priest said something like "He was very arrogant in the beginning. I don't know about goodness. Maybe. But I do know this. These two men are more than the moment when they killed Matt. Matt is our brother but so are they." At this point, Matt's friend crumbles in tears. And the priest is taken aback and reaches over to her "Oh, I am so sorry. Did I say the wrong thing? I didn't mean to hurt you." And she asks through her tears "Are you equating these men with Matt? Are they the same in God's eyes?" And the priest says something that moment that is brilliant. "Those tears you are crying right now. That hurt you are feeling for Matt. Those are good tears. That is a good hurt. You should be angry about what happened."

When Jesus rebukes the disciples, what he is rebuking is the instinct to ACT on the anger that quite naturally flares up in human hearts when we are confronted with pain. It isn't the anger itself that is the problem. It is the decision to stay there; to let anger become hate and to let hate turn to violence.

Anger can be a healthy thing. It can push us toward things like doing something to make a difference. That is what Matthew's mother did with her life. She and her family created the Matthew Shepherd Foundation and she has been a tireless advocate for understanding, compassion, and acceptance of those who are different. Their foundation was at the fore

front of new hate crime legislation that was signed into law in 2009. Did any of you see coverage of the funerals in Orlando to see the angels with the tall white wings that shield the grieving families from seeing the hate signs from protestors picketing the funerals? That is the Matthew Shepherd foundation in action.

We all have those moments in life when the pain and the horror of what human beings can do to each other hits you square in the gut and you cannot help but see RED. What the gospel challenges us to today is what we do with ourselves after that flair of indignation and anger subsides. Will we let ourselves be pulled into the works of the flesh or keep looking to Jesus letting the Spirit pull us toward these fruits of love, peace, kindness, gentleness....this really is the way of life.

It is for FREEDOM that Christ has set us free - Thanks be to God!