

**Take 'em Out, Jesus
Luke 9: 51-56
Don Lincoln**

A colleague of mine tells the following story:

"In the fall of 2003, I spent two weeks in Oxford, England, doing some research and writing. One Sunday morning I walked down to Saint Aldates Church, founded in 1226, in the center of town. As I walked into St. Aldates, the usher enthusiastically greeted me, "We welcome ALL sinners!"

"I've never forgotten that moment sixteen years ago," my friend said. "The usher couldn't have known it, but I needed to hear those words at that time and place in my life: that God welcomes me, always and forever, just as I am."¹ Maybe we should train our Sunday greeters accordingly: "Welcome, sinners!" And see who stays.....

Well it's clear from our text that Jesus and His disciples did not receive such a cordial welcome, but rather, the exact opposite.

Our text tells us twice within three verses that Jesus has turned his face toward Jerusalem! The emphasis is clear; this is a turning point for Jesus; this is steely determination. His ministry – instead of now going around the countryside and gathering, speaking, and teaching, He is focused in one direction. Between Him and that one direction is Samaria.

Now, Samaria is the region between the Jews who lived in northern Galilee and southern Judea. The people of that region – the Samaritans – are a religious offshoot of Judaism – they're cousins. Their heritage goes back hundreds of years to a time when a remnant of Israel's Northern Kingdom intermarried with foreigners. Because of that the pure Jews despised them. Because of their disputes, the Samaritans had settled in their own region and even established their own temple in that territory.

Eight centuries of hostility between Samaritans and Jews was still acute enough that Jews in the north would take a circuitous route east of the Jordan River when traveling to Jerusalem, going miles out of their way in order to avoid seeing the Samaritans.² But Jesus, whose face was set toward Jerusalem, chooses the direct route straight through Samaria.

Jesus sends his disciples ahead into a Samaritan village, probably to secure lodging and food for an overnight rest stop. The Samaritans, however, the text says, did not receive Jesus – and Luke tells us why: Because they knew His face was set toward Jerusalem. Somehow they knew that.

Maybe that's all it took. "Greetings, Samaritans. We're on our way to Jerusalem. Got a place we could stay tonight?" I'm guessing the Samaritans didn't appreciate Jews using their territory as a shortcut to Jerusalem. "You hate us – why should we be hospitable to you??"

James and John, two of Jesus' disciples, take offense, and they are quick to respond. "LORD! Do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them? Jesus, let's take 'em out!" In contemporary language it might've been, "Nuke 'em!" This sounds like Arnold Schwarzenegger: "I'll be back!"

This may well be the story of how James and John got their biblical nicknames – the Sons of Thunder – and from this story you can tell, it wasn't a name of affirmation.

Of the disciples' desire to incinerate the Samaritans, Protestant reformer Martin Luther had this to say: "Oh, you disciples! You think that anyone who does not accept Jesus is going straight to hell, and if they won't give Jesus lodging, you say, 'To the devil with you.' We are not to be like James and John, wishing vengeance to descend upon others. If God can suffer them, why cannot we? God does not need our fighting."³

I like to pretend that James and John don't reflect me; but my fear is that more often than not, they do. When I'm offended or rejected, my response is often revenge or retribution. A dozen years or so ago, I recited a little sketch told by comedian Emo Phillips titled Equustentialism, and I think it bears repeating. Here's the story.

I was in San Francisco once, walking along the golden Gate Bridge, and I saw this guy on the bridge about to jump. I said, "Don't jump!" And he turned. I looked and he had, well, you could say he had a long face like a horse. My heart went out to him. I said, "Why are you going to jump?"

"Because all my life people have called me names like Flicka or Trigger."

"Well, don't worry – it can't be that bad?"

"Why was I put on this earth? Nobody loves me."

"God loves you."

"How do you know there is a God?"

"Of COURSE there's a God. Do you think that billions of years ago a bunch of molecules floating around could turn into you and me?"

He says, "I do believe in God."

I said, "Are you a Christian or a Jew?"

"A Christian."

"Me TOO! Protestant or Catholic?"

“Protestant.”

“So am I. What franchise?”

“Baptist.”

“Same as me! Northern Baptist or Southern Baptist?”

“Northern Baptist.”

“Unbelievable! So am I! Northern Conservative Fundamentalist Baptist or Northern Conservative Reformed Baptist?”

“He says, “Northern Conservative Reformed Baptist.”

I said, “Me too. Northern Conservative Reformed Baptist Great Lakes Region or Northern Conservative Reformed Baptist Eastern Region?”

He said, “Northern Conservative Reformed Baptist Great Lakes Region.”

“Unbelievable. Northern Conservative Reformed Baptist Great Lakes Region Council of 1879 or Northern Conservative Reformed Baptist Great Lakes Region Council of 1922?”

He says, “Northern Conservative Reformed Baptist Great Lakes Region Council of 1922.”

“DIE, you heretic!” And I shoved him off the bridge.”

It really would be funny, if it weren't sadly so close to the truth. Where do you think all the Protestant divisions came from? Most of us don't have to go far to think of religious disputes – like Protestant/Catholic disputes in this region – THERE'S some deep blood!! In our homes, our neighborhoods, our nation. Really? Christians? Protestant and Catholic? Or Protestant/Protestant disputes. Or even Presbyterian and Presbyterian disputes? We're as good at disputing as anybody. This is Jews and Samaritans – Jews and a SECT of Jews.

Our reactions to “the other” are so often division, and fear, and disputes. That's the way has been for a long time and still continues in our lives and is far too often similar to that of James and John, because like them, we lose track of our mission and our purpose.

Go back with me to the beginning of chapter nine in Luke, and listen to Jesus as he commissions the disciples: “Then Jesus called the twelve together and gave them power and authority over all demons and to cure diseases, and he sent them out to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal. He said to them, “Take nothing for your journey, no staff, nor bag, nor bread, nor money — not even an extra tunic.

Whatever house you enter, stay there, and leave from there. Wherever they do not welcome you, as you are leaving that town shake the dust off your feet as a testimony against them.”

Proclaim the kingdom of God and heal. And if you're not made welcome, shake the dust off your feet. James and John want to incinerate the entire village – men, women, children, pets. Shaking the dust off your feet is a little bit down the road, but it's sure a long way from nuking somebody!

I don't think many of us are in danger of burning down villages. But you and I know that religious history is ripe with instances of burning – burning people – heretics – burning villages, burning churches.

This past Tuesday the NY Times reported in New Delhi, India, that after apprehending a Muslim man suspected of stealing a motorcycle, a Hindu mob tied him to a lamppost and beat him for 12 hours while forcing him to chant praises to Hindu gods.

Part of the reason videos of the event went viral and spread so quickly was not so much the vigilante beating — a relatively common occurrence in many areas of India — but the mob's repeated efforts to force the victim to chant slogans often used by the governing Party of India, "Hail Lord Ram" and "Hail Hanuman," referring to Hindu gods. This in the name of religion.

Jesus rebukes James and John for their attitude of revenge and retribution. The call, Jesus reminds them, is to bring life, not death. There is a footnote in this scripture text. It doesn't show up in all the manuscripts so that is why it is a footnote. But, even if it's not in all the early manuscripts, the intention is certainly there. It says this, "Stop doing this!"

Jesus rebukes them, "you do not know what spirit you are of for the son of man has not come to destroy the lives of human beings but to save them. Your call is to bring life, not death – even to those who reject or insult you," Jesus says. To practice forgiveness and forbearance, not retribution and revenge, gentleness and patience, because even the people who make our blood boil are precious to God.⁴

The Samaritans rejected Jesus out of their own ignorance and fear. The same kind of ignorance and fear that continues to provide the fuel that feeds prejudice and bigotry today. The Samaritans did not know anything about Jesus. They only thought they knew Jesus because they had identified Jesus as a Jew – His face was turned towards Jerusalem and so they therefore categorized and prejudged Jesus, the Lord of the universe.

They assumed that Jesus had the same contempt for them that all the other Jews they'd met had for them. So they rejected Jesus out of ignorance of who Jesus really was and out of fear of the group to which he associated.

And James and John did the very same thing to the people in this village in Samaria. We echo this style far too often. Particularly in this time of painful divisions. Pro-choice versus pro-life. Blue versus red. We, too, are inclined to "nuke" those whose views on race, religion, immigration, taxation, climate change, and a host of other important issues are different from our own. Like the disciples, our inclination when we've been wounded or rejected is to return evil for evil.⁵ To demonize the other.

Jesus tells us to journey with the messiah of God is to be formed in the white-hot crucible of Kingdom values: self-sacrifice, self-giving, self-forgetfulness.⁶ A spirit of forgiveness and love, not revenge and retribution.

Make me an instrument of your peace, Lord. Even when I get hatred in return make me an instrument of your peace and your love.

In the current climate of our nation and world may this text speak a word to all of us. May it be so. AMEN.

1. Daniel Clendenin, www.JourneyWithJesus.net, 8th Day, June 2, 2019.
2. Kenneth Samuel, Day 1, "*Jesus and Rejection*," April 24, 2005.
3. Roland H. Bainton, *The Martin Luther Easter Book*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983
4. Debi Thomas, "*Truth in Advertising*," www.JourneyWithJesus.net, June 23, 2019.
5. Inward Outward daily quotes, Church of the Savior, Sunday, June 30, 2019.
6. Mitties McDonald Dechamplain, *Feasting on the Gospels*, Commentary on Luke 9: 51-62.