

A couple weeks ago I was driving down Riverside Drive to church for an evening meeting. AS I came to a red light, I noticed in my rearview mirror a new model Ford Bronco right behind me. I thought, wow, what a cool car! Right at that moment, the Bronco whipped around me into the left turn lane, laying on their horn and waving at me using only one finger. Now, I can't be certain, but I think they were mad at me for preventing them from getting to the red light faster. Naturally, I waved back, only I waved with all my fingers. Somehow the whole incident feels symbolic for this moment in time. There's a lot of anger out there right now, and if I'm honest, there's a lot of anger in here too. Now, by a quick show of hands, how many of you have wanted to call fire down from heaven on someone or something over the past week or two? Am I the only one? It's been a tough one, hasn't it? I don't say that to make light of this moment. We are living in angry and divisive times.

How quickly we are ready to call down fire on one another, for stupid reasons and for consequential ones. Apparently, we are not the only ones. Two of Jesus' closest disciples, James and John ask him if they can do the same. That's why I love this story because for as long as I've been trying to follow Jesus, I still see some James and John in me, and I'm guessing some of you do as well. This passage is the turning point of Luke's Gospel. To this point, Jesus has been teaching, healing, and setting people free across the Galilee, which is the northern, rural part of Israel, but our reading today begins, **"As the time approached when Jesus was to be taken up into heaven, he determined to go to Jerusalem."** Now he has a direction. Some other translations says, "he set his face to Jerusalem." This is the turning point, after which there's no going back.

Jesus is going to Jerusalem to confront the religious and economic powers of the day and overcome them through non-violent, self-sacrificial love. That's the plan, and he will be killed for it. From here on out, his teaching becomes sharper, and seemingly less graceful. Jesus knows he is going to die, and that knowledge doesn't scare him or weaken him. It gives him a clarity and purpose he otherwise wouldn't have. Now, I thought about changing the metaphor from the Big Table for the next few weeks, because the Big Table implies celebration, whereas "let the dead bury their own dead" seems less celebratory. And to a degree that's true, but Jesus is not changing his message of grace and inclusion. What changes is that Jesus is helping us mature in our understanding of what grace really means.

Initially we hear Jesus say that he's come to bring good news to the poor and to set the prisoners free, and we think this is great! Jesus is welcoming us to trust that we are loved exactly as we are, and that God's table is big enough for us all, and that's true. But as we live into that reality, we learn that not everyone is excited to hear this news. **Jesus has come to set us free, but not all of us want to be free.** Some of us may not like things the way they are, but at least it's familiar. We may prefer the bondage of our present over the freedom Christ offers because we know the first and not the second.

In our passage, the Samaritan village he enters refuses to welcome him. How dare they? But this isn't surprising. Samaria is not where Jews go if you expect to receive a welcome. Jesus doesn't avoid going to hard places or doing hard things. Jews and Samaritans both considered the other to be heretics. It's worth noting that all of us are someone else's heretic. To be called a heretic is normal. Everyone is someone else's heretic. Jesus isn't bothered by the Samaritans rejection of him, but James and John are. They want to bring down fire, and they are not the only ones.

Following Jesus is not about protecting yourself. It's not about winning, or about destroying your enemies. It's about dying for them. And 2000 years later, as Christians we should understand this, yet we often respond like James and John. Richard Rohr talks about how Christianity as a religion is still immature. We've barely begun to process the basics of what Jesus taught. The gospel has largely been understood as a transaction whereby, we are forgiven our sins rather than forgiveness as process of transformation through which we become like Christ. We still have so much to learn, and thankfully Jesus is a patient teacher. Sometimes Jesus' teaching is comforting, and sometimes it comes in the form of rebuke, which is what he gives to James and John. Jesus isn't too polite that he won't rebuke them, or us when we need it. From Jesus, even rebuke is an act of love. Sometimes we need to be shocked awake from our stupor. Violence in word or deed has no place for those who follow Christ. **We don't destroy our enemies. We love them, even die for them.**

That's a hard teaching, isn't it? I don't want to die for my enemies. I'd rather just defeat them. I'd rather have them change and become like me, to see things the way I do, but I don't think that's happening any time soon. Can we wish well upon those with whom we disagree? Can we bless those who reject us, while still working for justice? Can we not return evil for evil but overcome evil with good? In this week where we celebrate our nation's freedom, may we remember the words of Dr. King, **"The choice today is no longer between violence and nonviolence. It is either nonviolence or nonexistence."** He was right then, and he's still right today.

Jesus is headed to Jerusalem, where he will face those who reject him, and he will not call down fire upon his enemies. He doesn't stir up an insurrection. He doesn't vow that his followers will avenge him. No, Jesus takes all our rage, our hatred, our violence into himself and sends back forgiveness. Jesus knows that if every act of violence is responded to in kind, then eventually it will consume us all. Instead, he allows the violence to stop with him. In doing this, Jesus shows us the path of true freedom.

We think of freedom as being able to say and do whatever we want, but that's an immature understanding. True freedom is about knowing why you are here, knowing what's worth living for, and what's worth dying for. That's why Jesus' words about letting the dead bury the dead and how no one who puts a hand on the plow and looks back is fit for God's kingdom aren't cruel. He's trying to set us free by showing us what's worth living and dying for, but not all of us want to be free. Jesus is the freest person who ever lived, which is a strange thing to say. He was subject to a ruthless foreign occupying Empire. He was a poor man in an oppressed minority. He was rejected by his own people for calling them to love their enemies. To us it may look like Jesus was anything but free, yet as Paul says in Galatians, it is for freedom that Christ set us free. True freedom isn't being able to indulge your selfish impulses, like calling down fire. **True freedom is the willingness to love your neighbor as yourself**, which sounds really simple. Turns out it's really, really hard. Jesus invites us to do hard things.

Following Jesus costs everything you have and is the path to true freedom. He calls us to let it all go and be free. Let go of your rage and the need to be right. Let go of your desire to protect yourself and defeat your enemies. Let go of your ego and your story of how things should be. Let go of everything and follow him. The cost of discipleship is to be totally vulnerable and therefore totally free. You can't have one without the other. And the reward for

following Jesus is true freedom for you and the redemption of the world. That's what's at stake here. The reward is that we stop crucifying each other and learn to love, serve, and care for one another, even those we wish to call fire down upon. The choice is not between violence and nonviolence but between nonviolence and nonexistence. Our nonviolent God forgives our sin and invites us to be transformed by nonviolent divine love.

Crossbound God,
nothing protects you
from open sky
and beckoning grave:
teach us to leave behind
the fear that kills what is different,
our love for what is dead and safe;
may we set our face like you
to find our true home,
our unexpected city of peace,
your fearless life;
through Jesus Christ, who will not turn back.
Amen.