



ST. MARK'S ON THE CAMPUS

Episcopal Church & Student Center

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The Rev. Jerrold Thompson
Sermon for the 5th Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 8
St. Mark's on the Campus
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Our gospel reading this morning opens with Luke telling us that the time was drawing near for Jesus' purpose to be fulfilled. So Jesus "*set his face to go to Jerusalem.*" That phrase echoes a description of the suffering servant in Isaiah, who is described as "setting his face like flint." Jewish Christians hearing the stories in Luke would have recognized that echo, an echo that helped them give shape to Jesus, this fellow human being in whom they encounter the living God.

A few lines later, we're told that the Samaritans "did not receive Jesus because he had his face set toward Jerusalem." It's hard to tell what exactly is going on here. The Samaritans and the Jews had a long history of animosity, with each group asserting its understanding of Judaism over and against the other group. It could be that the Samaritans are portrayed as rejecting Jesus because he is going to the holy place of those with whom they so vehemently disagree. Or it might be that that we are to hear them refusing to receive the suffering servant whom Jesus embodies. Or it might be that Luke leaves it deliberately ambiguous, holding both meanings at the same time.

In any case, even if this is one of those places that human bias creeps into the Bible – one group against another -- the bias is secondary to Luke's main point. His main point is that Jesus is being rejected because he is on his way to Jerusalem, on his way to humiliation and beating and death upon a cross. *Jesus' face is set like flint in that direction.* The gospel presses the point for all of us, just as it does for the Samaritans – in fact, just as it does for the apostles in our story this morning: "To what is *our* face set?" This passage reaches out and asks *us*, "Where are you headed?"

Our passage from Galatians this morning has these two lists, one naming sixteen different works of the flesh that keep us from the fullness of God's reign and ending with the words "and things like these," leaving the list open for our own imaginations; the other list tells us of nine fruits of the Spirit. When I first read the passage, I thought about how easily we can slip into seeing in others the ways they fulfill the first list rather than the other; and I was reminded of the offense taken by James and John in our gospel reading, who ask Jesus if they should call down fire from heaven on the Samaritans who refuse to receive Jesus.

It's very easy for all of us to see and name and categorize *someone else's* sin, the way *they* miss the mark. It's usually far easier for us to do that than it is for us to let Jesus shine his healing light on how *we* miss the mark, where *we* indulge the flesh, to use Paul's metaphor, rather than nurture the Spirit of God dwelling within and among us. Our gospel reading, and Luke's gospel in general, calls us to focus not on other people's sins, but on our own, the ways in which we ourselves refuse to receive Jesus into our lives and fail to integrate him into our communities.

Luke makes it clear that Jesus knows about hearts with divided loyalties. In part, that's what his responses are all about to these people in our gospel who want to follow him -- but who also want to take care of some other things: "I will follow you wherever you go!" Are you ready to have nowhere to lay your head at night? Are you prepared to live *without*? "Before I follow you let me go and bury my father." Don't you understand that the reign of God comes before social conventions, even before highly prized family relationships? The reign of God must come first in your life -- and be lived out in all your relationships. "I will follow you Lord -- but first let me say farewell to those at my home."

You must remember that you cannot set your face like flint and then be distracted; it must remain foremost in your heart and in your mind and in your soul, in those places within you where the love of God is called to dwell. No doubt Luke intends us to contrast these three who express an intention to follow Jesus, but first must do something else, with those whom Jesus calls toward the beginning of Luke's gospel.

One of them is Simon Peter. You might remember that the two encounter each other after Peter has had a long night fishing with little fruit for his work. Jesus tells him to lower his nets one more time, and after Simon Peter obeys him, the nets are unexpectedly filled with fish. When he returns to shore, he abandons everything and follows Jesus. And yet, Luke doesn't give us one-dimensional apostles.

This is also the gospel in which Peter, after proclaiming that he would do anything for Jesus – that he would die for him if it were necessary – denies him three times. In this gospel account, Jesus, following that third denial, turns and looks at Peter, one of the most poignant moments in all the gospel stories. What do you see in his eyes as they meet Peter's? I always see them overflowing not with accusation, but with compassion and mercy, and sadness. Maybe that same sadness is in his eyes when he turns and rebukes James and John in our gospel this morning for suggesting that they destroy the Samaritans.

Luke even paints the Samaritans themselves as more than one dimensional in relationship to Jesus and the those who follow him. This is the gospel in which we have the parable of the good Samaritan, who alone demonstrates love to the beaten man lying on the side of the road, in contrast to the faithful people who pass him by, those who belong to what is supposedly the holy group. And Luke is also the gospel writer who gives us the story of the ten lepers whom Jesus heals; only one, a Samaritan, kneels before Jesus and gives thanks.

For Luke, following Jesus calls us to live in part calls us to live in new ways, as we let go of old animosities we cling to, biases that keep us from living more fully into the reign of God. And it calls us to understand how deeply our loyalties really are divided, and to some degree always will be divided, even though our lives are, by God's grace, continual journeys of healing our divided hearts.

Luke gives us complex figures to live with, people like ourselves and the people sitting next to us, and the people we encounter each day, and the people we read about in the news, including those we find it easy to categorize because of the ways they miss the mark God has set before them. Like Peter, and James and John and the Samaritans in Luke's gospel, we all possess hearts with mixed

loyalties. Sometimes we have faces set like flint toward Jerusalem, determined to glorify God; and at other times, our faces are more like marshmallows set toward glorifying only ourselves and the groups to which we belong.

Just as he does with Peter, Jesus looks to us with those same eyes filled with compassion and with mercy, and with some sadness, and even an occasional rebuke. And, at the same time, Jesus remains -- with his face set like flint toward Jerusalem -- he remains abundantly clear about his call to us. "Foxes have holes and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head. . . Let the dead bury their own dead. As for you, go and proclaim God's reign . . . No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for God's reign."

May the Lord God have mercy upon us; for in that mercy, we most deeply trust.

And may the Lord God also grant us lives that fulfill His longing for us.

For we trust no less deeply in the answering of that prayer than we do in His mercy.

Amen.