

**“OUCH!”**

**Luke 9:51-62; Galatians 5:1, 13-25**

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When I read this morning's gospel reading I have a picture of Jesus walking down the road surrounded by his disciples. Jesus was planning to visit a Samaritan community. Now you have to remember here the Jews and Samaritans generally did not mix. Each group claimed to represent the “real” descendants of Israel. It was a 600 year old family feud dating back to the Babylonian Exile, and if you want to know more about it, see me later. For our purposes this morning, it is enough to know that the disciples would have thought it an act of extreme graciousness on Jesus' part that he would bother with Samaritan trash. And then, of course, the Samaritans refused to receive Jesus. The disciples were outraged, and beyond outrage, become a little drunk on their proximity to Jesus' power. Recently they had witnessed the event we call the Transfiguration: Jesus up on a mountain top with Moses and Elijah. The disciples were swaggering down the road here, and like a bunch of aggrieved 10 year olds, after the Samaritan rejection, they surrounded Jesus in essence saying, “Hey, Boss, can we get back at them, please, please. You know, rain a little fire and brimstone on their heads! Elijah did it once. Let's show them who they're messing with.”

Wearied both by the Samaritans' ungraciousness and the disciples' childishness, Jesus then encountered two more of these interesting humans for whom he'd decided he was willing to give up his life. We'll call the first Simon the businessman, who came to Jesus saying, “ You know, Jesus, I really like your stuff, and I'm willing to jump on the band wagon with you, but first, I've got to wait around until my dad dies and I know my inheritance is secure.” And then there's the second man, Levi the farmer, a practical guy whose approach to Jesus is, “I want to follow you, but I've got a lot of commitments already, and I've got to take care of them, and then when I have some free time, well, then I'll come and follow you...”

And Jesus had had enough. Enough. Really. I actually find myself liking that in Jesus. I want to believe that in the fullness of his humanity, he could have moments of being fed up with ours. And out of Jesus' mouth came words, not of kindness and encouragement, nor even of challenge, but instead sharp reproach. “Leave the dead to bury the dead, but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God.” “No one who looks back and puts his hand to the plow is worthy of the kingdom of God.”

They are some of the harshest words in all the gospels, and I am sure that those who first heard them drew back as if stung by a wasp. And we also, when we hear them read, I think for most of us, our first response is to take at least one step back. This is no pastoral, reassuring Jesus, patient with our sins. He is demanding, uncompromising. And we, well, we look much too much like James and John the disciples, or Simon the businessman, or Levi the farmer for our own

comfort. They were not bad people, after all. Maybe a little over-impressed with their own consequence. Maybe too concerned with “worldly” cares, like inheritances, and family, and obligations, and not wanting to take on too much. Maybe—and here I think is the crux of their problem and our own—maybe unsure of how much of their life they wanted to choose to give over to this Christian thing, to this following Jesus thing. And today Jesus offers them—and us—no out, no understanding of the complexity of our lives, no alternative to the choice of absolute commitment. Ouch.

Now my guess is that most of you don’t like being made to feel uncomfortable. Neither do I. But sometimes discomfort is the necessary prelude to growth. When I lived in Seattle, I had a full-time job, a husband, two small children, and I was taking classes at the university in my spare time. A good friend asked me one day to volunteer for some organization she was part of. I tried to brush away the request, saying I was too busy. I thought that would be the end of it. But she came back at me, saying “Liz, you spend your life asking busy people with busy lives to choose to give their time to the church. If you don’t volunteer yourself for things outside your busy life—maybe not my thing, but some thing—then you have no credibility with me or with anyone.” It was one of the most uncomfortable moments of my life. Also one of those conversations that comes back to me over and over again. Every time I’m tempted to say “no,” I hear Diane’s voice in my ear and I stop to reconsider. I don’t always say “yes,” but I always think at least twice before saying no.

Now my friend Diane would be very uncomfortable at being compared to Jesus, but it was the uncompromising nature of her statement that caught and still holds my attention. The teachings of Jesus that are the most difficult, most absolute, cause us to think about our faith over and over again. For example: it’s easier for a camel to get through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to get to heaven; the parable of the workers in the vineyard, and those one-hour workers paid as much as the 12 hour ones; or the rich young man who asked Jesus what to do to inherit eternal life, and Jesus said, “Give away all you have, and then come and follow me.” It doesn’t matter how many times we hear these texts, they always make us uneasy. But that’s their job. Every time we hear them, they call us to stop and measure ourselves against them. Time and again, they make us take a look at our assumptions, look at our behavior, because there’s no way to slide out sideways. And that’s a good thing. It should be a growing thing.

When we hear this morning’s scripture reading, when we think of all those people Jesus encountered that day, and the ways that they denied and wearied him, if we are faithful, it causes us to look inside ourselves, think of ourselves on that road alongside the others. What do we do that wearies our savior? How do we hedge our bets, make excuses, water down our commitment to one who loved us enough to die for us? What more could we be doing to love our neighbors, to help the poor, to create community, to live our lives “in the Spirit,” as the apostle Paul describes it this morning in his letter to the Galatians? What more is possible for me to do? What more for you?

They say the work of the church is to comfort the afflicted and to afflict the comfortable. That's not bad shorthand for who we are called to be with each other in this community, and as we go out in the world. Part of loving each other is being willing to challenge as well as support each other. Part of loving each other is to push ourselves as a community, to push each other as friends in Christ to find new and deeper ways to honor and serve the God we worship.

I love it when I am out and about in Corvallis and people tell me that they know of this church as a welcoming place, as a church that serves the community, as a church that walks its talk. But we can do more. We can all be better disciples, better companions to Jesus and to all those whom he loves. Sometimes to get there, God's going to have to make us uncomfortable; we're going to have to make each other uncomfortable, feel the temporary Ouch! that moves us out of complacency. But that's part of our faith journey together, as essential as any other part of love. Thanks be to God. Amen.