

**3 Pentecost  
June 30, 2019**

**In the name of the God of all Creation,  
The God alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus,  
And the power of God known in the Spirit.  
Amen.**

Let me begin by saying that this sermon is about a verse that is not included in our reading. As a matter of fact, it is not even included in the Bible we read from. But first, let me set the stage.

In our reading from Luke this morning we hear that Jesus is traveling through Samaria. Elsewhere in the gospels we also hear of the Samaritans, and it always seems to be in adversarial or pejorative terms. Obviously, the Jews and the Samaritans didn't get along. So, why did they dislike each other ... even to the point of prejudice and bigotry? What is so repugnant about a Samaritan to a Jew, and a Jew to a Samaritan?

This is a grudge that went back 600 years before Jesus. In 597 BCE the Assyrian army captured Jerusalem, destroyed the Temple, and sent the brightest and best of the Israelites to Babylon in what we know as the Babylonian exile. However, not all of the Israelites were deported. Some stayed in Israel ... a lot of them in the area of Samaria. Sixty years after the fall of Jerusalem ... in 538 BCE the Persian king, Cyrus the Great chased the Assyrians out of Israel and allowed for the exiled Jews in Babylon to return to their homeland.

During the Babylonian exile both groups ... the Israelites who stayed in the Samaritan area of Israel, and those who had been deported to Babylon ... adapted to their very different situations. For example, some of the Israelite women in Samaria married Assyrian soldiers of the occupying military force, and they had families. However, in contrast, the deported Israelites in Babylon refused to be assimilated into the Babylonian culture, and they strongly enforced rules to identify their community.

The Babylonian exile lasted 60 years. That meant that most of the adults who had been around when the Assyrians overran the country were now dead. The Jews who had remained in Samaria felt they had protected the true religion because they had stayed behind in the land the Lord had given them. On the other hand, the Jews returning from Babylon also claimed to be the ones carrying the true religion ... after all, they had been in a foreign land and had kept kosher for 60 years. The Jews were returning to Jerusalem to worship where the Temple had stood. Yet, since the Temple in Jerusalem had been destroyed by the Assyrians, those who lived in Samaria had chosen to worship at Mount Gerazim. And so the feud began. Each looked at themselves as being the ones upholding the true faith ... each claimed to be "right," so the other must be "wrong."

As we heard in this morning's reading Jesus had set his face to go to Jerusalem ... and to get there he had to go through Samaria. He sent his advance team to a Samaritan village to find lodging and food and to prepare for his arrival. However, Luke reports that "the people there

did not welcome him." Now, as a general rule, the Samaritans did not welcome pilgrims heading to Jerusalem since their temple was on Mount Garizim. They felt these pilgrims were worshipping at the wrong sanctuary. It was "us" and "them."

Thus, because they rejected Jesus, or maybe because of the Samaritan's ethnic hostility and prejudice towards Jews, the disciples James and John exploded in rage: "Lord, do you want us to call down fire from heaven to destroy them?!" They probably spoke figuratively, not literally, but that's small consolation given their desire for revenge. Notice that for James and John they were the "us" and the Samaritans were the "them." Yet, instead of rebuking the Samaritans who rejected Jesus and his disciples, Jesus turned and rebuked James and John for their reactive anger.

As I mention at the beginning, the heart of this sermon is in a footnote to this story. We don't really know what Jesus said in his rebuke of the disciples ... at least in the Bible we read from. And, some editor or scribe of Luke's gospel must have been puzzled by this "rebuke" as well, because in some ancient Greek manuscripts, right after Jesus rebukes James and John, there is an added verse ... a conclusion to the story ... "And Jesus said to them, 'You do not know what kind of spirit you are of, for the Son of Man did not come to destroy men's lives, but to save them.'"

Basically, some scribe or editor of Luke's gospel ... sometime after the original was written ... decided to add a verse so that the story would make some sense ... at least to him.

So, why isn't this extra verse in our Bible that we read this morning? If it was in some Bibles, why isn't it in all the Bibles? And, it turns out, that this is not the only verse that appears in some Bibles but not in others. And a larger question is ... who is it that decides what to include and not include in our Bible?

As of a few years ago, we had 5,735 ancient manuscripts of the New Testament. Some of these ancient manuscripts are just bits and pieces of papyrus, but some of them are complete books. No other ancient text, Homer or Aristotle for example, enjoys anything remotely close to this avalanche of manuscript attestation. However, we do not have any original complete text of any of the gospels ... they are all copies of copies. On top of that, these texts were all written in ancient Greek, and not one of the complete books of ancient texts looks exactly like what we now read in our Bible. Over the centuries scholars have taken different parts and put them together always with an eye to what they ... the scholars ... believe is what the original texts must have said. Yet no one knows for sure exactly what was written when ... in spite of what most biblical fundamentalists may believe.

A side note if you will: The King James Version of the Bible, which many traditionalist rely on, was written in 1604 through 1611. King James the VI of England gave the translators instructions intended to ensure that this new version of the English language Bible would conform to the ecclesiology of, and reflect the episcopal structure of, the Church of England and its belief in an ordained clergy.

Anyhow, just because a few ancient manuscripts have this extra verse, doesn't mean that it was originally include in Luke's Gospel. "And Jesus said to them, 'You do not know what kind of spirit you are of, for the Son of Man did not come to destroy men's lives, but to save them.'" For all I know, this may be another one of those "just because it didn't happen doesn't mean it isn't true."

But this added verse is central to what I have to say this morning. "The Son of Man did not come to destroy men's lives, but to save them." We may not be able to know if Jesus spoke those words, but I believe they express the broader Jesus tradition about which there's no debate. I believe this sounds like something Jesus would say. For example, later in Luke (19:10) Jesus says "The Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost." And, there are other places in the gospels where Jesus refers to the "Son of Man" in similar language. So, although the interpolation might not be authentic, I believe that the sentiment is.

Anyhow, back to the story of Jesus in the area of Samaria as he headed to Jerusalem ... When James and John invoked divine wrath on the Samaritans, they exemplified an attitude diametrically opposed to everything Jesus said and did. A few verses before this story in Luke's gospel the disciple John tried to stop an exorcist from healing a person because "he was not one of us." These zealous disciples transformed the good news of God's unconditional love for all people into the bad news that God had it in for them. The disciples fell for the old "us" and "them" dichotomy. The "good news" belonged to "us," the "bad news" was for "them" ... meaning others. "We" have the "right answer ... "they" have the "wrong" answer.

Does this sound so much different than today? "Us" and "them" certainly exists in our religious world ... and it exists in many other manifestations in the world around us. All one had to do is watch the news this week. The democratic debates devolved into an "us" and "them" even within the same political party. And the politics of division keep this country in a constant "us" and "them" way of thinking about those around us. And, what is happening at our southern border is all about "us" and "them." Yes, it was true in the time of Jesus ... it is still true today.

However, the "us" and "them" dichotomy did not work for Jesus. The story we hear of Jesus is that everyone is entitled to a full life worthy of respect and dignity. For Jesus no one was so "bad" that they should be destroyed. In fact just the opposite ... everyone enjoys the potential for the fullness of life. Everyone ... and that meant everyone ... is made in the image of God and has the potential to live that out in their lives.

This theme is also found in this week's lesson from Paul's letter to the Galatians. Paul emphasizes divine favor expressed through human love. "The only thing that matters," wrote Paul, "is faith expressing itself in love." You can summarize the entire Bible, Paul insisted, in five words: "Love your neighbor as yourself." Interestingly this is nearly a verbatim quote from Jesus. It comes in a story we will hear in a couple of weeks.

“Love your neighbor as yourself.” “Treat others the way you want to be treated” is another way of saying the same thing. In our Baptismal Covenant we vow to “respect the dignity of every human being.” This community of faith is committed to radical hospitality because I believe that each of us wants to be welcomed and affirmed, and therefore we understand the importance of embracing others. This community is committed to including all who cross the threshold because we know the pain of being excluded, and the value of being included, so we extend to others the inclusion that we want for ourselves. This community of faith empowers others in their lives, regardless of their station, because we know just how easy it is to be discouraged by prejudice, and how critical it is to acknowledge each and every fellow human being. It is imperative that we not react with spite and revenge ... just because others did it to us is no excuse for us to do it to them. That is what Jesus told James and John. “The Son of Man did not come to destroy men’s lives, but to save them.”

If we are to take seriously what Jesus took seriously then every encounter with a fellow child of God is an opportunity to encourage others to live into the fullness of God’s image. The way we do that is by acting in God’s image ourselves ... as individuals and as communities. We welcome those who others have turned away. We uphold those who others have disparaged and maligned. We encourage the discouraged. We treat others the way we want to be treated. We love our neighbors ... even those who want to do us harm ... we love our neighbors as ourselves. We do this because in doing so we live into the fullness of God’s image. We do this because we believe that everyone is made in the image of a loving God ... there is no “us” and “them.” We do this because we take seriously what Jesus took seriously. We do this because “The Son of Man did not come to destroy men’s lives, but to save them.”

Amen.