

**3 Pentecost
June 26, 2022**

**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.**

The news this week has further polarized an already divided nation. Whether it has to do with the January 6 Insurrection hearings, or the United States Supreme Court decisions, people are lining up on each side of an abyss. Each side believes they are “right” and the others are “wrong.” It is a classic “Us” and “Them” divide.

In our reading from Luke’s gospel 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. But why didn’t they get along? What is so distasteful 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 B.C.E. 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 Jews were deported. Some stayed in Israel ... a lot of them in Samaria. In 538 B.C.E., several generations and 60 years after the fall of Jerusalem, the Persian King Cyrus the Great ran off the Assyrians and allowed for the exiled Jews in Babylon to return to Israel.

During the Babylonian exile both groups ... the Samaritans in Israel, and the Jews in Babylon ... adapted to their situations. For example, some of the Samaritan women married Assyrian soldiers of the occupying military force, and they had families. On the other hand, in Babylon the Jews refused to be assimilated into the Babylonian culture and strongly enforced rules to identify their community.

By the time the exiled Jews in Babylon returned to Israel the Samaritans claimed that they had the true faith of Judaism ... after all they had remained in the land their Lord had given them. But the Jews returning from Babylon also claimed to be the ones carrying the true religion ... 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. However, since the Temple had been destroyed by the Assyrians, the Samaritans had chosen to worship at Mount Gerazim instead of Jerusalem. And so the feud began. Each looked at themselves as “Us” and the other as “Them.”

In this morning’s story Luke tells us that Jesus has set his face to go to Jerusalem ... and he has to go through Samaria ... the region of the Samaritans. He sent his advance team to a

Samaritan village to find lodging and food and to prepare for his arrival. "But the people there did not welcome him," writes Luke. Since the Samaritans worshipped on Mount Gerazim they did not welcome pilgrims headed to Jerusalem. It was "Us" and "Them."

Because they rejected Jesus, or maybe because of the Samaritan's ethnic hostility toward them, 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." But instead of rebuking the Samaritans who rejected him and his disciples, Jesus turned and rebuked James and John for their reactive anger.

In our reading this morning Luke does not tell us what Jesus said in his rebuke of James and John. However, some scribe, or editor of Luke's gospel thought it would be helpful to fill in the blank ... so he inserted a verse. That verse appears as a footnote in the Oxford Annotated Bible. 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 the lives of human beings, but to save them.'"

However, just because a few ancient manuscripts have this extra verse, doesn't mean that it was originally included 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 the lives of human beings, but to save them.'"

Maybe this is another one of those "just because it didn't happen doesn't mean it isn't true."

When James and John wanted to invoke 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.

Does this sound so much different than today? "Us" and "Them" certainly exists in our religious world ... and it exists in many other manifestations. All one had to do is watch the news this week. The Congressional hearing on the January 6 Insurrection ... the Supreme Court ruling on concealed carry of handguns in New York ... and the reversal of *Roe v. Wade*. In a nation already polarized around a number of cultural issues this was like throwing gasoline on a fire. They are all about "Us" and "Them." It was true in the time of Jesus ... it is still true today.

But 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 enjoyed the potential for

the fullness of life. Everyone ... and that meant everyone ... was made in the image of God and had 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 a verbatim quote from Jesus. It comes in a story we will hear in a couple of weeks. A lawyer asked Jesus, "What is the greatest commandment. Jesus answered with a quote from Deuteronomy in the Hebrew Torah and added, "Love your neighbor as yourself." You may remember that the lawyer then asked, "Who is my neighbor." And then Jesus then told the lawyer a story that we call the "Good Samaritan." You'll hear more about this in just 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 radical hospitality. 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 the lives of human beings, 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 the lives of human beings, but to save them."

Amen.