

Towson Presbyterian Church

June 30, 2019

Rev. Joel Strom

Galatians 5:1, 13-18 and Luke 9: 51-62

“The Standard Formula”

We need to begin with James and John’s question to Jesus at the very beginning of our reading. They, and maybe other disciples, were sent ahead to prepare for Jesus’s arrival. We’re not really sure what that looked like and what they were to do, but that was their task. And they enter a village that was filled with Samaritans. It’s helpful to note that during this time Jews do not like, or a better word is probably “hate,” Samaritans, and Samaritans feel the same way about Jews. They dislike each other, and James and John make no effort to try and challenge that assumption.

For some reason Jesus’s time in the village does not go well. We’re not really sure what that looked like – maybe the Samaritans weren’t interested in hearing what he had to say, his teaching was too challenging, or maybe the disciples were verbally and rudely told to leave. Who knows, but after seeing Jesus rejected by the Samaritans, James and John ask Jesus if they should command fire to come down and destroy the village.

It sounds like something right out of the last season of *Game of Thrones*, right? If you have seen it, you know what I’m talking about, and if you haven’t, I won’t give away any major spoilers, but there’s a scene where fire consumes the better part of a city, and it was difficult to watch. It was uncomfortable, scary and just sad to witness the loss of life, which is a core theme of *Game of Thrones* – the loss of life – but this episode in particular was just difficult to watch. And this is James and John’s reaction to feeling rejected and hurt by the Samaritans: *Lord, they hurt us, so what do you say we send a fireball down on them? You just give the word, Lord, and I’ll send that prayer right up. What?!*

Sometimes I’m grateful that the New Testament shows us the humanity of the disciples, or maybe the better way to say it is *the lack of humanity* in the disciples. They’re really not these spiritual giants that we often think they are, at least at this time in their lives, and they give us a picture of what the world really looks like, and just how difficult it is for us to follow the One they are trying to follow, too. James and John give us a picture of that same old formula that is still thriving and alive today, which is: we solve problems through violence, both physical and verbal violence, we define people as different than us, and assume people are less-than-human because they’re not a part of our tribe or group or nation. The same old formula is still alive and well today.

My family and I will leave tomorrow for a week of vacation in Chicago, which is where I lived from 1999 through 2005. I love that city and am really looking forward to seeing some of my friends. When I lived there, I couldn’t help but get into their sports – Chicago is a great sports town. And I was lucky enough in 2002 to get tickets to go see a Bears playoff. They were playing, of all teams, the Philadelphia Eagles...I wish Pastor Rob was here today. Now this game was just four months after 9/11, and I had noted a different energy at sporting events during that time. The New York Yankees had made a run to the World Series that fall and people, who previously couldn’t stand them, were actually rooting for them, which tells you something right there. The energy I sensed was that we had moved past this “Us v. Them” mentality that’s usually prevalent at sporting events. If you’ve been to a college or professional sporting

event, you know what I mean here. We, and I don't mean you, but our culture in general, we come in our jerseys and our colors and if we see someone who's not a part of our team, well...there's something wrong with them and we link their affiliation with the team they grew up rooting for and the area where they were born into with their sense of worth and dignity as a person. The months following 9/11 I noticed the energy had shifted away from that mentality and we as a culture were looking at what unites us instead of what divides us.

The playoff game was about to start and with the kickoff only a few minutes away, I noticed a couple of Eagles fans walking down the aisle to my right looking for their seats. A group of Bears fans just a couple rows from me saw them, with their green jerseys and jackets on, and proceeded to berate and throw obscenity after obscenity towards them, simply because they were wearing different colors and rooting for another team. They were a part of a different tribe of people which made them "less than." And in that moment, I remember thinking to myself, *"Oh...so now we're back. We're back. We're back to the standard formula of how we treat people who are different than us who are not a part of our group or tribe or family. We're back."*

Our Gospel reading from Luke has a lot to say about the tribes, groups and even families – biological families - that we are a part of. This is really a perplexing story because Jesus seems to criticize things that are good and necessary in life, right?! Burying a loved one and saying goodbye to your family of origin seem like needed and worthwhile things to do before leaving to follow Jesus.

And so I wonder, if in this very subversive story Jesus is trying to invite his followers into a much bigger story than what they used to? This is a story and a way of life that invites us to break out of the groups and tribes and people who are just like us, who look like us and talk like us and think like us. And I wonder if he's inviting us into a bigger family than just one's biological family? I wonder if when he talks about the Kingdom of God, he's talking about a reality that is far wider than just Jews or Samaritans, or Christians or Muslims? To live in the Kingdom of God, which he describes at the very end of our reading, is to live in a very different way than that same old formula that James and John exemplified for us.

In our first reading from Paul's letter to the church in Galatia, Paul makes a rather shocking statement. He takes his scriptures, the Hebrew Bible or our Old Testament, and says if we whittled the laws down to one single command – all 600 or so of them – they can be summarized in one command – love your neighbor as yourself. Which is really what Jesus is pointing to in today's reading. To follow, to orient our life around him, means that we are enrolling in a school where you will be invited to constantly learn *what it means to love*. Call it whatever we want – Christianity, discipleship, following Jesus - when Jesus says "Follow me" and we say "yes," we embark on a journey of continuously learning what it means to love.

And that sounds really nice right now, doesn't it, but when we get out of these four walls later today and back into our lives – it will probably around 2:00-2:30 today – we will remember just how hard it is to follow this Jesus, and just how challenging it is to love and not revert back into that standard formula. And if we're honest, that standard formula feels good sometimes. It does. Probably more than just sometimes, actually. It feels good to be right and they're wrong. It feels good to be above someone else. It feels good to be a part of the group that God loves more...

But as Paul says in Galatians, Christ has set us free *to love*. We have not been set free – loved accepted, forgiven – to then go and treat people in whatever way we see fit. Jesus has set us free for a purpose...so we can learn how to love. Because if we can't ever learn how to forgive, then we're not really free are

we? At least we're not free in our mind. And if we can't love those outside of our family or group or tribe or nation, we're not really free are we? Anger and judgment have their hooks in us and control us. Christ has set us free *to love*.

Throughout the week when I'm thinking about a sermon, I try and open my eyes and look for instances where my main point is being exemplified. So, if I'm talking about compassion, where do I see compassion lived out around me? What does it look like? This week as I opened my eyes looking for instances of what it looks like *to learn how to love*, instead, if I'm honest, what I noticed in myself was my own *inability* to love. I noticed just how difficult it is for me to love in the way that Jesus is inviting us to. And there's something very free in naming that *inability* to love. It is extremely free to get to the place where we realize we can't do it on our own. There is freedom in naming that, because it forces us to call on a Source greater than ourselves and say, "*Lord, I can't do this on my own. Help me to love.*"

As I was reading up on our scripture this past week I came across a commentary written by David Lose, who is a Lutheran pastor. And he made this great point about the fire from heaven that James and John would like to request. He said that Jesus says no to that request of fire that day, but a fire from heaven does come later. It comes on Pentecost – do you remember that story? – we just celebrated Pentecost a couple weeks ago. The fire from heaven comes and instead of consuming, it rests as a tiny flame on each of the disciples. And instead of dividing us, it connects us, so we can hear one another, and see one another, and care for one another.

God's Spirit, that is in us and around us, may it continue to move us, to nudge us, to push us to spread our love outside of our comfort zones, because the more we do that... we will learn how to love.

Thanks be to God.