

The Twelve | Enrolled in the School of Jesus (B)

The Excluded Exorcist and the Sons of Thunder

Luke 9.43-56

March 15, 2020 (The Ides of March)

And they were all amazed at the greatness of God. But while everyone was marveling at all that He was doing, He said to His disciples,⁴⁴ "Let these words sink into your ears; for the Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men."⁴⁵ But they did not understand this statement, and it was concealed from them so that they would not perceive it; and they were afraid to ask Him about this statement.

⁴⁶ An argument started among them as to which of them might be the greatest. ⁴⁷ But Jesus, knowing what they were thinking in their heart, took a child and stood him by His side,⁴⁸ and said to them, "Whoever receives this child in My name receives Me, and whoever receives Me receives Him who sent Me; for the one who is least among all of you, this is the one who is great."

⁴⁹ John answered and said, "Master, we saw someone casting out demons in Your name; and we tried to prevent him because he does not follow along with us."⁵⁰ But Jesus said to him, "Do not hinder him; for he who is not against you is for you."

⁵¹ When the days were approaching for His ascension, He was determined to go to Jerusalem;⁵² and He sent messengers on ahead of Him, and they went and entered a village of the Samaritans to make arrangements for Him.⁵³ But they did not receive Him, because He was traveling toward Jerusalem.⁵⁴ When His disciples James and John saw this, they said, "Lord, do You want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?"⁵⁵ But He turned and rebuked them, and said, "You do not know what kind of spirit you are of;⁵⁶ for the Son of Man did not come to destroy men's lives, but to save them." And they went on to another village.

This whole chapter holds together so cohesively that I had to include a little overlap from last week.

We've been seeing how Jesus Christ is bringing His students along little by little to see something they could never have dreamed or imagined that He, an uncredentialed carpenter-rabbi who speaks with such authority and like no one else ever spoke (John 7.46) that He is the long awaited Messiah and that HE will save His people by suffering, by accepting our judgment.

This seemed upside-down to them... and it IS! And that's why Jesus Christ employs PARADOX – the weak are strong. The mourners are happy. The poor are rich. The humble/low are the highest/greatest.

The disciples are very slow to see this. Their whole orientation is about power and dominance and getting over other people by means of popularity and competition and status and success.

And THIS is the chapter in which their notions (which are ALSO basically OUR ideas too!) THEIR cherished beliefs about what's wrong with the world and HOW to fix it – their views collide with the basic principles of Jesus and His administration. They don't really know Him and they don't really know themselves.

Today, this comes out in two ways that often afflict religious people and the big words for these two conditions are sectarianism and misplaced zeal or extremism. I want to look at these two unhelpful (to put it lightly) two harmful conditions and who is most susceptible to them. Second, how Jesus cures these impulses (sectarianism/extremism [misplaced zeal]) Then, finally how does religion without these ugly traits function – (how is it different?)

First, the two nasty features of typical religion and who is most susceptible TO them: I have to remind you of how pivotal this chapter is. After the feeding of the 5000, the disciples have seen enough and Jesus Christ sees that they're ready for the first test. "Who do people say that I am?" – "Well, some say Elijah or one of the prophets reincarnated..."

"But who do YOU say that I am?" – Peter answers for the twelve – "You are the Christ of God!"

Immediately Jesus moves to Lesson Two – "(I), the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed and be raised up on the third day." (9.22)

And we've seen how foreign this was to the disciples – all their cultural programming, all that they'd ever learned or imagined about the Messiah had them looking for a judge, a general, a conqueror, and NOT A SUFFERER! So they concluded that they must be misunderstanding their Rabbi – Jesus must be using some sort of symbolic parable or riddle!

And then He takes three of the disciples UP on the mountain to see what His Kingdom will be. Peter, James and John witness His transformation as He radiates light and He speaks with Moses and Elijah, (the Law and Prophets embodied) and the three heroes speak of Jesus Christ's "EXODUS" that He will accomplish... a loaded word Luke uses.

And when they come down from the mountain there's a frantic man with a demon-possessed child and the disciples can't cast the spirit OUT of the boy. It's a terrible picture of life in the valley, life in the fallen world, NOT on the mountain!

Jesus casts out the spirit and frees the boy and the crowd is very impressed (v. 43 – “amazed...marvels”) and then Jesus sees again the stars in the eyes of His impressionable disciples, like they’re swept away with thoughts of power and big positions, “We were fishermen – but now living large in the King’s Court!”

And Jesus warns them, “Watch it, guys! Let me remind you that the Cross precedes the Crown and the Thorns precedes the Throne ... (v. 44 – “Let these words sink into your ears – I, the Son of Man, am going to be delivered into the hands of men.”)

But, next verse, “they did not understand this statement... and were afraid to ask...”

Then, as we saw last week...stuck in their starry-eyed, power mentality, they argue which of them will hold the top cabinet positions in the new administration. And Jesus answers with the paradox – “unless you become little you will never be big – unless you lower yourself to serve you will never be great.”

And then John, (you know: the Apostle of Love) JOHN says, “Uh...Rabbi... we have a branding issue! We have a franchise violation! We saw someone casting out demons in Your name – and he’s not in our little group so... we shut it down!”

John is sectarian! He’s a partisan person, a separatist or a denominationalist – “Us Four and No More!” and he speaks for the group, “WE tried to prevent him.” It turns out they’re ALL partisan people!

It’s funny because in the next chapter, Jesus sends 70 people out into the villages to represent Him and serve people in His name. AND it’s funny that THEY were unable to cast out the evil spirit from the boy and this unknown exorcist seems to believe in Jesus Christ enough to ACTUALLY CAST OUT DEMONS... but “he’s not one of us – so we shut him down!”

Then, v. 51 begins Luke’s famous travel narrative and the Rabbi and the Twelve begin the long journey to Jerusalem. They pass through the territory called Samaria. The Samaritans were themselves sectarians and they were an offshoot or mutation of Judaism.

The Samaritans had their own temple (NOT in Jerusalem) and their Scriptures were only the books of Moses but also a little different... The Jews thought of them as a kind of cult with a sketchy past and the Samaritans were just as suspicious toward the Jews.

When the Samaritans learned that Jesus and the disciples were headed for Jerusalem, they said, “Your kind ain’t welcome in these parts!” and JOHN (the Apostle of Love!) and his older brother James (to whom Jesus gave the name “Sons of Thunder” Mark 3.17) these guys ask, “Should we call down fire from heaven to consume them?”

It's a classic case of misplaced zeal or extremism! The King James adds, "Just as Elijah did" as if to say, "Lord, we know that Elijah was bad-to-the-bone and You're even greater than Elijah so you must be SUPER-BAD-TO-THE-BONE! So what say we just smoke these stupid Samaritans?!"

"But He turned and rebuked them..."

We would say that they got carried away. And the truth is that religious people DO get carried away. And we could very easily conclude that the way to NOT get carried away is to avoid religion...and don't be religious... maybe be spiritual but not religious.

But don't you see WE'RE all religious. Even if you don't apply that word to yourself...if you prefer to be called spiritual OR EVEN if you don't consider yourself spiritual OR religious (atheist or anti-supernatural or strictly materialist) STILL WHATEVER YOU PRIZE above anything else IS really your religion.

And IF we're ALL religious (according to that definition) – you may not even KNOW what you value above all else... but everyone DOES value something supremely and that means WE ARE ALL SUSCEPTIBLE and prone to being partisan and having misplaced zeal or extremism.

It is very easy for people in ANY organization to split and divide from one another, to break into parties or schisms, factions or sects. As soon as you define your values or beliefs or tastes or opinions, you are on your way to dividing from others who don't share those values, tastes or opinions.

AND as soon as you ask yourself, "How can I really show or demonstrate how committed I am TO THESE VALUES, BELIEFS, TASTES or OPINIONS – you face the very real risk of extremism.

And we may THINK that the answer lies in just being moderate but that is most often another word for undecided, uncommitted, undefined or apathetic.

Jesus Christ's response is NOT to say, "Chill out and stop taking ideas so seriously!" In fact at the end of this chapter there are three "moderates" and Jesus dismisses them all as missing the boat.

I love the way Kathy Keller sort of called out the almost universal condemnation of the word "fundamentalist" after the 9-11 attacks. It seemed like all the editorials were saying, "See?! All fundamentalism leads to violence!" And she asked, "Wait! What if your fundamental is non-violence? In other words doesn't it all depend on WHAT IS THE FUNDAMENTAL in your fundamentalism?!"

She used the example of the Amish – they're certainly fundamentalists but their fundamental or chief belief is peace – the only way to get violent with that fundamental is to denounce it!

And with Jesus Christ, He is saying again and again, “My great value, My leading idea is to serve, to take on Myself the burden that My people cannot carry.”

Yes, Elijah called down fire from heaven as an act of judgment... and I am Greater than Elijah so I will... TAKE THE JUDGMENT MYSELF. V.51: “When the time was approaching for His ascension, HE WAS DETERMINED to go to Jerusalem!”

He came not to condemn but to BE condemned on behalf of the guilty. He came (56) “NOT to destroy people’s lives but to save them.” That’s His fundamental, animating principle and purpose.

There are menacing forces of spiritual evil in the world... like demonic powers and sectarianism and misplaced zeal/extremism... the Samaritans have all broken God’s Laws and are guilty before God...and so are the Jews and the twelve disciples and so are the gentiles – the world is guilty – YOU ARE GUILTY BEFORE GOD and I AM GUILTY BEFORE GOD. Sin and guilt – our moral failings are deserving of judgment.

AND He, Jesus Christ, sets His face toward Jerusalem to be judged for anyone who recognizes his or her need and receives the gift He gives and the gift He IS.

And you see, if this is the BIG VALUE in my life – if I see myself accurately as a person who has failed to love God and failed to love others – a person with a long, long record of willful failings AND YET I ALSO SEE THAT THE FIRE OF JUDGMENT THAT I DESERVED has fallen on Him who went to Jerusalem for me – then the more invested I become in THAT fundamental value – the more loving I will be... hesitant to break ties with people.

I will see other believers in Jesus Christ who hold different views on the minor things – and while I have convictions or decisions about how a local church is to be governed or who is to be baptized (believers only or their children too?) or what exactly happens in Holy Communion – and those things are not unimportant or trivial (we have to make up our minds) but IN ESSENTIALS, UNITY (Apostles’ Creed Christianity!) in essentials unity, in non-essentials LIBERTY and in ALL THINGS CHARITY – LOVE is the fundamental... and the more I’m fixated on that, the more loving I become to YOU and toward Him WHO FIRST LOVED ME.

You know in one of the great ironies on the Bible, after the resurrection of Jesus, the deacon Phillip went into Samaria and shared the Good News and lots of Samaritans believed in Jesus Christ. (Acts CH 8)

And the Mother Church in Jerusalem wanted to know if it was real so they dispatched a few disciples to “inspect the fruit” to go see if these former sectarian, extremist, cult-members, the Samaritans, really did believe... and the two they sent were Peter and JOHN (the Apostle of LOVE!)

See, by that time the fundamental really had seeped into the heart of John, the Son of Thunder, and he must have had a great hysterical laugh at himself as he remembered, “Man, I tried to call the fire of judgment down on these guys – but because the judgment fell INSTEAD on Jesus – the only fire that fell on me was the fire of the Spirit of Love and NOW THE SAMARITANS believe in Him who came to save us and make us brothers!”

In necessariis unitas, in dubiis libertas, in omnibus caritas (Latin phrase translated: "in essentials, unity; in doubtful things, liberty; in all things, charity")

- Marco Antonio de Dominis (Archbishop of Split [Spalato]; *De Republica Ecclesiastica*, 1617)

Will the months to come be difficult? Chances are, yes; the virus will weigh heavily on the healthcare system and its providers. It will impact our families and friends, the economy, our businesses. Many more events will be cancelled or postponed.

But it is not judgment, and it is not punishment. That has already been dealt with on the cross. There is grace to be found in learning how anxious and afraid we actually are. It is a grace to learn how unkind and combative I've been with friends and acquaintances about the nature of the virus. It is a grace to learn how much of a jerk we can be to our neighbors when we fight over toilet paper and hand sanitizer. It is a grace for those that have been overreactive and also for those who have brushed it all off as not-serious.

The worst being brought out of each of us can be exactly what reveals our need for Jesus—the one person who really does save us from ourselves.

- Bryant Trinh, “The Pandemic and the Coffee Shop: What We Learn in Chaos” (MBird.com, March 12, 2020)

