

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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May these words of my mouth and this meditation of all our hearts be acceptable to you O Lord, our source of power and our compassion. Amen.

Well I feel like I should just come right out and say it: this gospel text that we just heard is flat out troubling to me. And, if Jesus' words and the actions of the disciples have you feeling a bit uneasy or uncertain, know that you are in good company there. Undoubtedly, there's quite a lot going on in these 11 short verses: James and John ask to burn down a Samaritan Village for refusing their request to lodge there, people approach Jesus to become one of his followers but want to take care of personal matters, and then Jesus puts on a display of what I can only call an atrocious lack of empathy in responding to these individuals. And then, the whole passage wraps up with Jesus essentially saying some people just aren't cut out for the kingdom of God. So, yes. I imagine I'm not alone in feeling, at the very least, uneasy by all of these things.

Luckily, I spent a solid 8 years of my adult life getting 2 advanced degrees specifically so I could read troubling passages like this on and have some, emphasis SOME, idea of what's going on within them, and what they mean for us today as people of faith in the modern era.

I'll try to do my best to peel back the layers of what's going on here, while trying not to get *too* academic with it. Despite my passion and fervor for theology and religious studies, during those aforementioned 8 years of schooling, I was certainly not immune to dozing off while listening to many a dry and plodding lecture from well-meaning biblical scholars and theology professors. So, let's get into it, shall we?

We have a story in front of us. A small and seemingly self-contained narrative of Jesus and his disciples doing ministry around Galilee and Jesus beginning his journey to Jerusalem, where he will eventually be arrested, put on trial, and put to death on a cross. The overarching theme of this passage has to do with power. Not necessarily with how it is acquired and maintained, but more so in how it is perceived, people's expectations of it, and what Jesus does with it.

At the outset of his journey, Jesus sends messengers ahead to seek lodging in a town of Samaritans. Brief note: Samaritans and Judeans historically did not get along. So, when word makes it back to Jesus that the town has rejected his proposal of staying among them, James and John (2 of the 12 apostles) want to display power through violence. To them, a town of historic enemies have rejected their Lord. So, they think a show of power and force is in order and ask to bring fire down upon the town, and teach the Samaritans their errors. In one of the more comforting moments of this passage, Jesus however, rebukes them for even suggesting this.

The story then continues with several people approaching Jesus wanting to follow and join the crowd of disciples. To one, Jesus essentially says “where I’m going, there’s no certainty of home.” To another who wants to bury his deceased father first he says “let the dead bury their own dead” and to another who wants to say farewell to presumably his entire lifelong social circle he says “no one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.”

Now, it might be tempting, and certainly I have heard people do just this through the years, to take all of these sayings of Jesus at face value and try to apply them to our modern context. I understand and even empathize with the desire to make some sense and meaning of these troubling words of Jesus. I’ve heard interpretations ranging from speculation on who truly gets into heaven to trying to construct hierarchies of relationships in order to be in right relationship with God, family, and friends. But the thing is, Jesus’ words do not exist in a vacuum. And here’s where I’ll really start putting those degrees to use, because if there was ANYthing that my professors in undergrad and seminary hammered into my brain, it’s the importance of context. What happens before this story? What happens after? How does this fit the broader narrative of Luke’s gospel? And how is this story impacted by what we know to have been taking place historically, societally, and culturally in that region at the time? Let’s start small.

This passage is in the 9th chapter of Luke’s gospel, and is at a turning point in Jesus’ ministry. Up to this point, he has been doing miraculous things all

around the region of galilee. In the 9th chapter alone, we hear of Jesus feeding 5000 people, calling together the 12 and giving them authority to heal and cast out demons, he heals a boy who is troubled by a demon, he is transfigured on top of a mountain and keeps company with Moses and Elijah, he foretells his own death, and teaches crowds of hundreds that the least among them is the greatest.

All of this happens in a relatively condensed period of Jesus' life in a small-ish region of the ancient near-east. So is it any wonder that James and John think they can rain fire down upon their enemies? Is it any wonder that strangers approach Jesus, this rabbi who some are calling the messiah, and pledging their lives to following him? The disciples have played firsthand witness to Jesus working actual miracles, and word of his deeds has spread through the region with people starting to view Jesus as a powerful figure. He teaches, he heals, he casts out demons, he prophesies, he slices, dices, and makes julienne fries! (I'm just making sure y'all are still with me here). For an occupied people, it is no wonder that they recognize the inherent power contained within Jesus' words and actions.

This is important, too, within the broader context of Luke's entire gospel. Luke is distinct from Matthew, Mark, and John in just how much it focuses on the presence of Roman Empire and the fact that Jesus is from and preaches to an occupied population. There are themes in Luke's gospel of liberation but especially liberation for the already poor and marginalized. Jesus is seen and portrayed as a savior to the people who will liberate them from

oppression and restore them to their former glory yes, but also their way of life, and their dignity as a people.

It would seem that from the literary devices and narrative alone, Luke's Gospel is indeed setting up Jesus to be some powerful and impressive messianic figure who will overthrow the oppressor and certainly, this passage shows us that that is who the disciples and even those who simply hear of Jesus' deeds perceive him as. But then we are shown that, while Jesus is indeed powerful, that power does not function the way we humans might expect it to.

When James and John ask to bring fire down upon the Samaritans, Jesus instead rebukes them. And, I wish it was more of a struggle to find a modern-day parallel of people indiscriminately attacking and even literally raining fire down upon others just because of a perceived slight against their god. But, Israel's now 295-day-long genocide of Palestinians in Gaza is first to come to mind. Let alone our own government's eagerness and willingness to bomb Iran simply at the behest of Israel. I find it incredibly poignant that relatively early in their life of discipleship, James and John are looking for the kind of power they experience from Rome, in Jesus. They want a conqueror, a warrior, a mighty show of force to tell the world "we are not to be denied what we want." Yet Jesus rebukes them for this. Rejection of the messiah himself is not grounds for punishment. It turns out that the power found in Jesus does not operate the way we might expect or even want. And Jesus' responses to the would-be disciples further solidify this.

When they approach this rabbi of whom they have heard marvelous things and declare their desire to follow him, he goes on to tell them essentially “this life is not glamorous, nor is it powerful in the way you desire. To follow me, you cannot live as you have been living. You won’t have the comforts of what is familiar. You cannot stay hung up on past matters. Life among my followers is a new thing.” Power in Christ is only found in the act of giving it up. And *this* I believe is the main point of this passage. To teach and remind us that God does not follow the rules and trends of the world we occupy. To be a follower of Christ is to play by an entirely different rulebook.

I recognize I’ve been going long here, but I assure you I am close to wrapping it up. You still with me? Have I lost anyone yet? Sunday Morning Nappers? I don’t think many of you would disagree with the statement that our world, and especially the country we live in remains obsessed with power. If you follow the news at all, every new story of how the current administration, congress, and judicial branch are attempting to further consolidate and hold power, wealth, and resources for themselves are evidence of this.

And I’m not sure how much of a comfort it is for me to stand before you and say “our God does not ascribe to this understanding of power.” Because it still exists, the individuals who ascribe to this power are still there, they are making decisions and enacting plans that have very real, very terrifying in some instances effects on your and my and our neighbor’s lives.

But at this point in time, at this point in history, I'm not sure the words and teachings of Jesus are supposed to be a source of comfort, so much as they are to be a source of resilience in the face of increasingly troubling times. Our baptismal identity sets us apart from the world. Not so we can step away and disengage from the world taking some nonexistent moral high ground and say "I'm better than this." But to say "we know that true power is found not in wielding it as a cudgel, but plowing a field for a better future." Power in Christ is only powerful when it is given away. And the powerful of this world are not the ones who showboat with bravado, and empty promises, and targeted bombing strikes, and threats of deportation. The powerful ones are those who clothe the needy. Who feed the hungry. Who welcome the stranger. Who care for the lonely. Who see Christ in every other human being, regardless of their background, their country of origin, their gender expression, their sexual identity, their economic situation, their history. The powerful ones are the ones who follow the example Christ set and freely and willingly give that power away.

My siblings in Christ, I am deeply troubled by the ways that history is unfolding in front of us, and I wish in so many ways that it were different. And yet, I find myself thankful for our shared identity as followers of Christ. In a world obsessed with power, may we grow ever more bold in our willingness to give our power away to uplift those around us. May our strength come from co-creating a better world, a better moment, a better life for all people, as Jesus would have us do. Amen.