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Luke 9:51-62

Jesus and the disciples are traveling to Jerusalem when they stop in Samaria; Samaria was located in the northern Kingdom of Israel. The Samaritans and Jews were in a centuries old conflict.

Conflict began when the Jews returned from the Babylonian exile in 538 BCE. Samaritans were considered a distinct ethnic and religious group which didn't worship in the Temple in Jerusalem but in Gerazim.

The Samaritans only accepted the 5 books of the Torah, so they were not considered worshipers of the one true God. Jews considered them impure and inferior.

Any of you have a story of feeling inferior? When I was 16, I went on a summer exchange in France. When my time finished, I went to England to visit a friend. Well, to visit a boy I knew. I was chasing a boy. His parents knew I was coming; they had met me once in Arizona, but they were none too happy about me being there.

I remember sitting down on a chair in their hallway and the Father announcing, "Do you like that chair? It's 400 years old and belonged to King or Duke such and such of whatever, my fifth great grandfather." I sprang out of that chair like a jack-in-the-box.

Prior to that, I think the only place I had ever stayed several nights in a row away from home was at my grandmother's in Indianapolis, and she was a cafeteria lady who had no precious antiques. I sensed I was a bad guest, even though I was using my good manners, I just didn't know how NOT to be a bad guest.

My last night in England, I went to my room at bedtime (the guest room in their fancy, old English house) and started packing: wrapping up my souvenirs, emptying my drawers, zipping suitcases. See, I was young, and I didn't know that packing was a very loud activity in an old house and that I was keeping my friend's parents up all night. In the morning, in their indirect, British way they announced: "We understand you finished your packing."

Hospitality is easy when it's convenient. Christian love is easy when we take a natural liking to someone. It's all so much more of a challenge with a stranger with strange ways, or say, with me at 16.

The days we're drawing near when Jesus was to be taken up to heaven and he had set his face towards Jerusalem (Luke 9:51). "Set his face," means he was determined. He knew Jerusalem held his destiny, his suffering and death and resurrection. And Jesus turns toward it, and travels through Samaria, the city that symbolizes opposition.¹

"They entered a village of the Samaritans to make ready for him; but they did not receive him" (Luke 9:53). So not being accepted was consequential. The Samaritans rejected this itinerant Jewish preacher named Jesus and his rag-tag followers, bunch of weirdos. Friends, the God we follow took on flesh and then didn't fit in. The disciples early ministry depended upon people taking them in.

Earlier in verse 3 Jesus had prepared his disciples for the journey, prepared them for rejection saying, "*Whatever house you enter, stay there, and leave from there. Wherever they do not welcome you, as you are leaving that town shake the dust off your feet as a testimony against them*" (Lk 9:4-5).

James and John's response to rejection? "Do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?" A literal "scorched earth" response. Who hasn't felt that? Anyone here struggle with strong emotions? When I was applying to seminary, I toured Yale Divinity School. I loved it so much I told my brother, "If they don't accept me I'm going to burn the place down." Mine was a biblical response.

¹ Anchor Bible Commentary: Luke, 824.

It is within the context of rejection that Jesus invokes the natural world and juxtaposes it with the life of one who follows God. “Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head” (Lk 9:58).

I previously understood this lesson to mean that Jesus was poor, without lodging, unlike the animals with their cozy dens and nests. But the context is quite different. An entire village has rejected Jesus and his followers. And when his disciples earnestly say, “I will follow you wherever you go”, Jesus isn’t invoking the foxes and birds to warn his disciples about homelessness.

Jesus is preparing them, and us, to know that those who follow him also will be rejected. We cannot expect this world to accommodate us.

We are past the era when to be a Christian was to be respectable. The priest abuse scandals and mega churches have nearly destroyed our credibility. The rise of fundamentalist Christianity in the public square, with its anti-intellectual and anti-science stances, puts all of us Christians under suspicion. It is an uphill battle to evangelize the welcome of the Episcopal Church in a world that falsely presumes we reject science, feminism, LGBTQ+ people, and sometimes even democracy.

The opposite of rejection is welcome. When we say we welcome the stranger, according to Matthew 25, we welcome their shortcomings, their different customs, their different dress, what we perceive as their lack of etiquette.

We welcome others because our Savior Jesus Christ was rejected. God was rejected by those whom God had created, rejected at Mary’s pregnancy, when she was derided for being unwed, rejected by innkeepers with no rooms, rejected by a society that crucified him.

Yet, even on the cross Jesus creates space for welcome. Jesus turns to a criminal on his right and welcomes him, “Truly, today you will be with me in paradise” (Lk 23:39-43). A criminal, a guilty criminal unlike Jesus, being executed. Folks, seriously, all are welcome.

When we welcome the stranger, we acknowledge their beliefs might be different. We welcome the immaturity of the young and the crotchiness of the old.

Welcome and hospitality is biblically ordained because humans are fragile and prickly and wounded. A meal and a place to lay our heads is the most basic security, a healing balm, reassurance that we belong in this world.

We follow Jesus out these doors and into a world that doesn't know the God we follow, the God who became enfleshed so that we might be more like God; the God who forgives, the God whose mercy is incalculable.

The God who speaks through the languages of physics and philosophy and poetry and song. The God we remember every Sunday, the God who empowers us for mission with a meal. If only we could share this truth in the face of counterfeit Christianity, that our God is love. By God's Grace may we sublimate our prejudices and preferences into love. Go out the door. Don't look back.