

Luke 9:51-62
June 26, 2022

Grace and peace be with you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

For some of us, it has been a rough week. For others, maybe not so much.

For some, the rulings of the Supreme Court this past week have brought on despair. For others, there is celebration as they finally got what they wanted.

And then on Thursday, some of our very own Rocky Mountain Synod youth were held up at gun point on their way to their youth group meeting at St. Marks in Aurora.

For some of us, it has been a very rough week, and for all of us there is a lesson here to learn today about what to do when things do not go as we would want them to, when oppression seems to run rampant.

As you may recall, Luke wrote his Gospel to gentiles, like us, non-Jews who lived in an empire. For Luke, his audience lived in the Roman Empire. For us, it's the United States, and I know it's not exactly the same, but the same principles of empire surrounds us, as it does everyone, because we, like the early Jesus' followers, all live in two kingdoms at the same time. We live under a human formed government and we also, more importantly, live under God's rule.

And, we might also say that we live in a third kingdom as well, the kingdom of the culture that surrounds us. But, never the less, God's Kingdom, which has no barriers or boundaries, no ins or outs which is everywhere we go, is our ultimate home, and not ultimate as in the future, but ultimate as the most important kingdom in which we live.

So, when things in the empire seem to be out of control and we are feeling hopeless, we turn to God. We put our trust in God, not in people, because we are all flawed, all of us. So, we put our trust in God, knowing that God loves us fully and completely, more than any human being ever can, and it is because of that love that we live differently in the world.

When James and John ask Jesus if they should send fire and brimstone down on the Samaritan village, they were acting as the Roman Empire would act. For Rome, might made right and in order to keep the "*pax Romana*," the peace of Rome, they used violence to secure it.

Jesus rebukes James and John, because the Kingdom of God does not operate as the empire of Rome does. Violence is not the answer. It's never the answer. And besides, Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem and the cross. A stop at this Samaritan village was not God's plan. It may have been the disciples' plan, but it wasn't God's plan, and so Jesus moves on and has no feelings of ire toward that town at all.

And I can't help but wonder, if it were a Jewish town that sent Jesus away, would James and John have had the same urge to destroy it.

The Jews and the Samaritans were always at odds with one another, mostly because the Jews deemed the Samaritans to be unclean and refused to be in a relationship with these their distant relatives, who by no fault of their own were left behind and mingled with the Assyrians and Babylonians who moved in. But, they never gave up their faith in God. They too were merely victims of empires. Jesus understood that.

So, Jesus rebukes James and John. The Kingdom of God is about healing and wholeness. The Kingdom of God is relational. The Kingdom of God is forgiveness. The Kingdom of God is about abundant life for all people, no matter who they are. The Kingdom of God is the exact opposite of empire, which is greedy, violent, power hungry, hierarchical, oppressive, and squashes the poor.

And so Paul, in his letter to the Galatians, offers them, and us, advice in how to live in God's Kingdom while living in the midst of empire, because the Galatians were also oppressed by the Romans. They too were a conquered people who were deemed to be the lowest of the low, totally uncivilized by Roman standards, no different than the Jews.

Paul understood the struggle the Galatians were having, because he experienced them himself as a Jew. So Paul writes to them to change their frame of reference. He steers their eyes away from Rome and to the community that is surrounding them.

We have no control over the empire, but the Kingdom of God is among us in our personal relationships with one another. We can't control the empire, but we can control how we treat one another. We do not have to operate as the empire does, because we know through experience that it is crap.

There is another way. God's way.

So, Paul a Jew who is also a Roman citizen, tells us that in the midst of the empire, of things going completely wrong, we can still live in God's Kingdom through the fruits of the Spirit right where we are. The empire can never stop us from sharing the fruits of the Spirit, never, not even if we are thrown into a dark and dank pit.

The fruit of the Spirit is to love those who are with you right where you are, to be always joyful knowing the Lord's presence, to be at peace - Christ is with us, to be kind and generous with all who are in any need as a testament to who God is, to trust God that God's will will be done, to return no one evil for evil, to say no to violence in all of its forms, and to not give in to the pressure to be anyone other than the beloved child of God you are, because the Holy Spirit is with you - now and always..

The Holy Spirit is with us, not only to strengthen us to live God's love right where we are, but also to hear our prayers, to hear our cries. We are not alone.

God knows oppression. God has experienced oppression. Jesus Christ was crucified on a cross. The whole story is filled with oppression, but Jesus doesn't stay dead. Death is not the end of the story. Life is!

So, we are a death and resurrection people. Threats of death do not scare us, because we know that life always prevails.

So, we don't look to the past, but to the future from which God's kingdom is coming to us fully realized.

In the hope of that Kingdom, we live today as if it is already here. We live in hope, faith, and love in the confidence of God's peace, which enables us to be bold right where we are, standing up to empire and oppression whenever we encounter them by living the fruit of the Spirit, which is life giving for others.

God has shown us the path of life. It is Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior.

So, do not be afraid. Do not let your hearts be troubled. God is with us and for us, and through the Holy Spirit, we get to live that truth right here and now.

Thanks be to God. Amen.