

Luke 9:51-56

There are certain restaurants, coffee shops, and other places of business that are not welcoming Donald Trump or his supporters. And I imagine there are also some businesses that are banning Hillary Clinton and those who support her. Both of these candidates have their eye on the White House. If it wasn't for that...if their faces were not set toward the office of president, all of these businesses would surely relax their ban and welcome them onto their premises.

Jesus' face in our text is set to go to Jerusalem. And for this reason, a town in Samaria is not welcoming Him. He and His followers are banned from their restaurants, from their motels and inns, from even walking through their streets. If Jesus does not have His eye on the cross outside the city of Jerusalem, the people of the town would relax their ban and receive Him. It's because the Samaritans hate the Jews. And since Jesus is not stopping there in their town for them, but only as a place to stay for a night on His journey, they reject Him and do not set out the welcome mat for Him.

This really upsets James and John. The town is insulting Jesus! Don't they know who He is? James and John are so irate that they ask Jesus: "*Do You want us to tell fire to come down from heaven and consume them?* They deserve to die...right now! How dare these people ban Jesus from their town! We'll show them. We'll call down judgment upon them! Fire from heaven will destroy all of them; that's what we'll do!"

James and John are right. To not welcome Jesus is to bring down God's wrath upon yourself. The ultimate sin is to reject Jesus. If the people of the town were simply a bunch of thieves, adulterers, and murderers, that would be better...better than flat-out refusing the Lord Jesus Christ.

James and John are right...but they are wrong. How dare they play God! The right of judgment does not belong to them but to God alone. They can shake off the dust of their sandals at the town. They can warn them that to reject Jesus is the way of death. But to call down the fire of judgment upon them is not within their authority.

Sometimes people become so angry that they use a phrase they ought never use: "Go to hell!" That's playing God. That's being James and John. That's calling down the fire of judgment upon someone. Even if that phrase is not part of our vocabulary, you and I have within our hearts the same judgmental attitude that lived within James and John. "I'm special," is what we think, "because I am one who welcomes Jesus. My heart is not like that Samaritan town that refused Him. I'm different from that. I receive my Lord. I put out the welcome mat for Him."

To see ourselves in a good way like this is to judge others. Yes, you are different from those who reject Christ. You are here today receiving your Lord and others are not; nor do they ever. But how dare you and I look within ourselves as to why we are different. You did not put out the welcome mat for Jesus; He put it there. We are not special because we receive Christ. We are special because He receives us. The difference is not something about us that moved God toward us, and not toward others. The only difference between you, and those who are like the town in Samaria, is that God has shown mercy to you.

If this puffs us up, then we are refusing His mercy. Then we are worse than those who do not set out the welcome mat for Jesus, and we will be judged more harshly than they will. When James and John speak such judgmental words about the Samaritans, Jesus turns to rebuke them. And that same rebuke is for us

whenever we want God to withhold His mercy toward another, but rather to judge and condemn that one.

Jesus did not come to condemn the world. Had God only wanted to condemn sinners, He would not have become man. He could have stayed up in heaven and sent fire down upon the earth. But this is not the heart of God. He became man within the womb of the Virgin Mary. He set His face toward the cross outside Jerusalem to face the fire that every sinner deserves; to be engulfed in the flames of judgment for you and me.

He went to the cross even for that town in Samaria that rejected Him. They refused Him, but He did not refuse to bear their sin...nor yours. They did not welcome Him, yet He welcomed into His body the punishment they deserved. "*Shall we call down fire from heaven to consume them?*" cry James and John. "No!" says Jesus, for that fire from heaven would come upon Him as He hung on the cross for them, and for you.

In Jesus' entire ministry He performed many miracles. But He did no miracle involving fire. Fire is reserved for the final judgment. At that time, and only then, will the fire of judgment consume all those who refused the mercy of God; who did not welcome and receive Jesus as Lord. That judgment is coming, but now is the day of mercy. Jesus did no miracle involving fire, but He did many miracles involving water, bread, and wine; and every miracle He did by the word of His mouth. The fire is not here yet. What is here is water, word, bread and wine. Now is not the time for condemnation. Now is the time for salvation. Jesus is here in flesh and blood for you. There is no fire here, but there is bread and wine. There is His word of mercy. There is the water of Baptism.

Maybe someone is angry at you. Maybe someone wishes that God would judge you. But there is no fire here. There is only love and grace. Your God is not here to condemn you. He is here to forgive you. Jesus is here in bread and wine so that you are able to taste His mercy. Jesus covers you with the water of Baptism so that the fires of judgment cannot harm you. From His mouth you do not hear the words, "Send down judgment upon these sinners!" but rather, "*Father, forgive them...*"

You are forgiven by a gracious God. And everyone that you have shared angry words with; everyone who has hurt you and sinned against you, has that same gracious God. And He has declared that they, too, are forgiven because Jesus felt the fire also for them. Some of these will never be your friends, but you can still love them and pray for them. That is what James and John should have done. Rather than wanting to call judgment down upon that town, they should have bowed their heads in prayer asking God to show mercy to that town.

As Jesus was about to ascend into heaven, He told James and John, and the rest of His apostles, that they were to go and preach the Gospel beginning in Jerusalem and Judea, but then going into Samaria. I wonder if James and John made it a point to revisit that same town. Perhaps so. And this time they may have found a different result. They may have found a people eager to hear the good news of Jesus.

There are people in your life who are like that town in Samaria. Even if they are refusing Jesus now, keep praying for them. God can show mercy to them just as He has shown mercy to you. And because of you, those precious souls will, then, be in heaven with you, and you will share in their joy forever. Amen.