

Jesus says it's time... It's time to go to Jerusalem...

Our gospel reading has three parts: the story of Jesus setting his face to go to Jerusalem, the story of the disciples wanting to rain violence on the Samaritans, and the conversation with those who would follow him.

This morning I'd like to weave these elements together a little bit. Jerusalem, Violence and Discipleship... The fabric of faith is always a process of reflection and action-- always engaging our very real world, where we live...

A couple summers ago, the church I was serving did an activity where we colored pictures of Jesus and we took those pictures with us when we were traveling. It was kind of like flat Stanley, instead it was flat Jesus. People would go camping and share a picture of themselves with Jesus on Facebook...

Well, I put my flat Jesus on the motorcycle; I took a picture and shared it on Facebook. My smart-aleck brother asked, "Did someone run over him?" I replied, "In a manner of speaking," yes...

Jesus has a pretty good idea what awaits him in Jerusalem; and he will indeed be "run over" by a mob of good religious people... And yet, Jesus still sets his face-- it's time to go to Jerusalem.

Undoubtedly, Jesus had been thinking and praying about this a great deal... He knows the cross awaits him. All decisions have a moment of clarity. And this is it... There is resolve and determination...

And exactly because of this decision, Jesus wants to keep going, and consequently not stay with the Samaritans... James and John misinterpret, they think it's because Jesus doesn't like those dirty rotten people! And so, they offer to command fire to come down from heaven and destroy them!

But Jesus **rebukes** them... Strong language... Strongly suggests that this is fundamentally the wrong way to even think! Jesus will not allow any violence in the name of God...

In fact, Jesus is going to Jerusalem exactly to be God's verdict on violence. Jesus will be "run over" by a mob of people, and will not only forgive them, God will raise Jesus from the dead, to show that God is on the side of the victim, not on the side of the violent.

And this story will change the very heart of the universe... And so, Jesus set his face to go to Jerusalem... There is clarity and resolve...

In our reading someone says that he will follow Jesus anywhere he goes. That kind of sounds like Peter, doesn't it? All bluster and eager to please... But truth is-- following a person and hanging on a cross for that person are two different things!

And I'll be honest, I'm not signing up for hanging on a cross. And yet, there is something vitally important here, the cross shaped life is different, we all know that sometimes it is painful to love our neighbors.

Author and educator Parker Palmer tells a story of his dad—a small business owner. Every night at supper, his dad would rant and rave about a certain

employee. How he was always messing up and costing the business a lot money and customers.

One evening Parker was tired of hearing it and asked his dad, why don't you just fire him? His dad looked at him and replied, "Are you kidding, he has a family and a mortgage, if I fire him, he'll lose everything."

Sometimes we don't like people. Sometimes we have to crucify our own likes and wants for the benefit of the larger community. We might not like it, but it's our calling. And ultimately, it's deeply meaningful.

Another disciple tells Jesus he will follow him, but first he has to bury his father. Jesus says to him, "Let the dead bury their own dead." There is a lot packed into this metaphor, and I think it's important for today.

Quick history lesson...

In 1808 French military leader, Napoleon invaded south into the Iberian Peninsula, what is now Spain, in what is known as the Peninsular Wars. He came upon two villages that vehemently hated each other. They had been at war with each other for hundreds of years. They despised each other.

Napoleon noticed their mutual animosity and made his army visible to both villages, but didn't attack them.

Interestingly, instead of the two villages working together to defend themselves against a common enemy, their hatred for each other intensified-- they virtually

killed each other off. Napoleon watched and when he was tired of waiting, he just waltzed in and took over without any resistance.

Ultimately, these two villages would rather die than work together. Rivals can become so “locked-in” to their hatred that they lose all perspective. My favorite thinker, Rene Girard, calls this “An escalation to the extremes...” We vilify each other to the point that we all look like monsters to each other.

The Apostle Paul calls this devouring one another. I think this is what Jesus means by letting the dead bury their own dead. When I go visiting, people often ask me, “What’s going on in this world; what’s happened to our country?”

I agree, it is a sad mess. And I wonder... are we as a country running directly into this escalation of extremes? This locked-in and unchecked violence toward one another? A passion to be so right, that we lose all perspective?

Every big fire, at some point starts out as a little spark. And we all know how those sparks start—desires and wants, rivalry, jealousy, conflicts, quarrels, all those things that Paul mentioned in our reading from Galatians this morning! Seemingly little things that nurture big and bigger things-- hatred, violence, death and destruction.

When we ask the question, what can we do about all this? Perhaps we all need to look in the mirror. And wonder, how many sparks have we contributed to this consuming fire.

Quick story... A while back, I have an old High School friend who posted something on his Facebook wall that was ridiculing people who didn’t think like

him and part of the message included a historical fact, but a fact that is often misinterpreted. History is always more nuanced than we think...

I responded in a way that I thought would be helpful, and tried to give the fact a little context. Someone I didn't even know labeled me and ridiculed me. And boy, my blood started to boil... I wanted so desperately to return the insult, to tell him what an ignoramus he was... But I stopped, as much as I wanted to rip into him, I stopped, I didn't return the insult...

When your blood is boiling, when you passionately want to get into the fight, it takes a lot of effort to let it go. Believe me, as you all know-- I mess up a lot, but that day I didn't. I did not return evil for evil.

The eighth commandment is about bearing false witness against our neighbor. Luther says we are to interpret everything our neighbor does in the best possible light. A lot easier said than done.

We are in a very strange period of history in our country. And yet God is fully in charge. Every predicament is also an opportunity. It's always a good spiritual practice to do more listening and a little less judging. This following Jesus is hard stuff...

The good news this morning is that Jesus goes to Jerusalem... Jesus does in fact get run over. He is the victim of all those human jealousies, anger, hatred, righteousness... Jesus died to the violence that is oh, so, human. He was crucified on a cross. And God raised him from the dead to show us the error of our ways.

And the church is God's new creation. We are a new kind of community. We certainly aren't perfect by any stretch of the imagination, but we are a community shaped around a crucified and risen savior. We seek not so much to crucify others, as to crucify ourselves in service to others.

We are a body of diverse people, with different skills and abilities, with different views and perspectives, and yet Jesus is our center. Jesus is the unity amidst our diversity and **all** together we are the body of Christ. We mess up, we confess our sins, and we try again. God doesn't love us because we're good; God loves us because God is good!

Let's remember Jesus, and try not to run over each other. Let's all be loving, kind and gracious. After all, we are unique people with a unique message and for the sake of a broken world. We make a very real difference in this world... Now, more than ever...

Amen.