

## Sermon by Sister Monica Clare, CSJB, June 30, 2019

### Luke 9:51-62

Today's Gospel contains four encounters between Jesus and other people, and when you look at these four encounters, at first, it might look like they're unrelated.

Now, there isn't ever just one way to interpret any passage of scripture. There are actually myriad ways to look at it, and whenever Jesus speaks in the Gospels he is always saying a multitude of things at the same time. One way we might look at this particular text is to sort of helicopter up and try and understand what Jesus might have been saying in a general, thematic way.

The first encounter, between Jesus and James and John, always makes me laugh because it's one of those Three Stooges moments in the Gospels, where the disciples were completely clueless about the nature of God. The setting here is that Jesus and his followers had gone to a village of Samaritans. Now Samaritans were actually Jews who had been left behind in Israel after the other Jews were taken into exile in Babylon and so after the exile, there was a disagreement between the Samaritans and the Jews about where the center of worship should be. So here the Samaritan village had rejected Jesus' teachings because he was a Jew who believed Jerusalem was the center of worship and the Samaritans believed that their temple on Mt. Gerizim was the center, and because of this disagreement, James and John turn to Jesus in complete seriousness and ask him "So – do you want us to incinerate them?" And it says here "Jesus rebuked them", so I can just imagine Jesus going "NO!! I do not want you to set them on fire! Let's just move on!" and what I see here, in my own interpretation of this scripture, is Jesus telling them, as he does people over and over in the Gospels "I'm not that kind of god," meaning here "I am not the god of vengeance and destruction that you have been brought up to believe I am. I am not the god who's going to destroy all your enemies and help you all take over the world." And so here, Jesus is telling the people to let go of their old notions about what they think God is, and instead listen to him, the incarnation of God himself, explaining that he is actually a God of love and compassion.

Now the other three encounters in this Gospel, between Jesus and people who are curious about following him, might seem to go into the category of what my esteemed former colleague, the Rev. Stephen Gerth at the Church of Saint Mary the Virgin in New York City, refers to as the "Mean Jesus." Father Gerth says that in the Gospels there are instances of the Nice Jesus and the Mean Jesus because Jesus says some pretty harsh things to people. I tend to reject that theory, though. I don't think Jesus is ever a mean Jesus. I think he's the loving God of my understanding all the time so I am going to let him off the hook here.

With the first man, I would like to think that Jesus is simply telling him “The Son of man has nowhere to lay his head” as a profound observation about the inability of society to understand who he actually is, rather than ignoring the poor guy’s desire to follow him and simply complaining about not having a permanent place to live. Jesus here is simply telling the man yes, come and follow me, but it is not going to be easy. He is saying to him “Right now there is no safe place for my teachings to dwell, in such a broken, dangerous world.” He’s probably also speaking symbolically here in reference to foxes and birds. Later in Luke he calls Herod Antipas an “old fox” and in the book of Isaiah, Cyrus of Persia was referred to as a bird of prey, so it’s possible Jesus was saying the rulers of the world have a safe, secure place for themselves and their message, but God does not.

When Jesus tells the second man “let the dead bury their own dead” I don’t think he was literally saying “Don’t go to your own father’s funeral. I know they’re expecting you and that you probably have some duties to perform for your family, but don’t go. Follow me instead.” That sounds a little too egotistical and dictatorial for the Jesus of my understanding. I would like to think maybe Jesus might have instead meant something about inviting this man to reject old religious practices and the beliefs of his family and his culture that are no longer working, and instead embrace something new.

The third man tells Jesus he will follow him but he first needs to say goodbye to his loved ones back at home. Jesus says to him “No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.” I think what he means here is not “Don’t go to be with your loved ones and set things right with them.” But rather “If you want to follow me, don’t do it halfway. Don’t stay stuck in old ways of thinking and keep wondering if you should go back to that. If you’re going to commit to my new way, you have to commit with your whole heart.”

We can see Jesus’ instructions to embrace something new in our own spiritual lives today. We can try to be vigilant about not becoming what they sometimes call “the mechanical church” – to not fall into a pattern of just going through the motions and saying the words without having any real energy or meaning behind them. In our prayer life, we can try to leave behind any methods that have become dry and empty and instead find ways to connect with God that are alive and that promote our spiritual growth. In the church, we can try to always remember the reasons why we do things, and if we can’t remember, then we need to ask ourselves why we are still doing them.

Jesus’ entry into the world was meant to turn everything upside down and to challenge the beliefs and structures that were in place at that time, and I believe that in our lives, and in the life of our world, Jesus is still trying to do this. He is asking us to leave behind the things that are empty, negative or destructive and instead embrace his good news of life and love and hope.

