

13th Sunday C (Luke 9:51-62)

One of the better known facts of the New Testament is that Jews in general disliked, distrusted, and disdained Samaritans. Perhaps we aren't aware that Samaritans reciprocated those thoughts and feelings. The animosity between these two groups of people flowed both ways. It had been like that for centuries. No one quite remembered how this animosity got started. Sort of reminds us of other situations in our own world, Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland, Jews and Palestinians in Israel, Orthodox and Catholics in Ukraine, Shiites and Sunni in Iraq, Hutus and Tutsi in Rwanda. Each side saw themselves as the offended rather than the offender, and felt more than justified in contempt for the other. Mutual forgiveness was out of the question.

Today's Gospel tells of a day when Jesus and his disciples were on the receiving end of such resentment. They were on their way from Galilee to Jerusalem, which carried them through Samaria. Their planned itinerary called for a rest stop at the equivalent of a local hotel in a particular Samaritan town. But the locals wouldn't allow them to stay in their town because they were Jews on their way to Jerusalem. James and John, the sons of thunder, were furious and wanted to call down fire from heaven to destroy the town and all its inhabitants. But Jesus, of course, would have no part of that. He reprimanded his two hotheaded friends, and then sadly walked away from that bigoted community and moved on to another town.

Jesus knew that the only way to break the vicious cycle of resentment was to refuse to strike back. This lesson in breaking a violent cycle of resentment is yet to be learned in our world today. Our ethic still bears the striking resemblance to the ancient code of "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth." Our national support of capital punishment gives sad witness to this. We answer evil with evil, bitterness with bitterness, hatred with hatred, insult with insult. And we degrade ourselves.

In our personal relationships some of us perhaps operate on the basis of retaliation. The store clerk is rude to me; I will be rude to her. The other driver blasts his horn at me; I will blast my horn at him, or respond with a non-verbal gesture. A co-worker is unfair with me; I will think and scheme until I figure out some way to get even. My husband or wife, brother or sister is unkind to me; I will make it my business to be equally unkind to him or her. "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth."

The process of bitterness and resentment goes on forever until someone finds the courage to break the cycle. An old Negro Spiritual says: "The world treat you mean, Lord; and dey treat me mean too: But that's how things is down here; dey don't know who you is. You done told us how; we is tryin'. Master, you done showed us how, even when you's dyin'." Jesus has indeed showed us the way to break the vicious cycle of resentment. Do we know who he is? Do we have the courage to follow him? We gather to give thanks for his life giving presence in our lives.

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