

Commentary on the Gospel for Tue, Sep 30th 2014

Today's gospel reading introduces Jesus' purposeful journey to Jerusalem, which will result in his passion, death, resurrection and ascension. Luke suggests Jesus' sense of his destiny when he writes, "When the days for his being taken up were fulfilled, he resolutely determined to journey to Jerusalem and he sent messengers ahead of him" (9:51).

Since Jesus and his disciples are starting from Galilee, heading toward Jerusalem means that he needs to pass through Samaritan territory. Then Luke writes, "On the way they entered a Samaritan village to prepare for his reception there, but they would not welcome him because the destination of his journey was Jerusalem."

Now what is the connection between the destination of Jerusalem and the Samaritans' refusal of hospitality to Jesus? Luke obviously presumes that his readers will understand, but many contemporary readers remain clueless. The missing information? We can learn the source of Samaritan hostility by recalling the account of Jesus' conversation with the Samaritan woman in the Gospel of John. The quarrel between Samaritans and Jews regarding the proper place to worship of God--Mount Gerizim for Samaritans, but Jerusalem for Jews-- was already centuries old by the time of Jesus. So, for Samaritans, a group of Galilean Jews heading for Jerusalem to celebrate Passover was a group of Israelite heretics practicing their heresy ! — and therefore not to be encouraged with Samaritan hospitality.

Understandably, this breach of Middle-eastern hospitality (feed the traveling stranger) was offensive to James and John, who were moved to some feelings of reciprocal hostility: "Lord, do you want us to call down fire from heaven to consume them?" Jesus, however, will not go along with this reaction to the Samaritan rejection. As Luke reports, "Jesus turned and rebuked them, and they journeyed to another village." What a great example of Jesus' modeling his own teaching about responding nonviolently to hostile rejection! He pays attention to the source of the Samaritan behavior. He realizes that these are fellow-Israelites who are doing their best to be faithful to their tradition about the proper way to worship God. He knows where the Samaritans are "coming from." That enables him to stay cool and refuse to escalate the hostility by finding a non-hostile way of responding — exactly as he taught in the Sermon on the Mount (or on the Plain in Luke, chapter 6).

The take-away for us is obvious. If we consider ourselves disciples of Jesus, when we meet some form of rejection, the first thing to do is not to "get back" with some hostile act of our own but rather to take the effort to consider what is a possible source of the other's hostility — their own sense of defending their values, their own woundedness, their own prior experience of rejection? That kind of thinking is a way of loving "the enemy." That takes a little leap of restraint and imagination, but it is exactly what Jesus expects of his followers (see Matthew 5 or Luke 6).

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