

“Overcoming History”

Sundays after Pentecost

Luke 9:51-56

June 27, 2010

It is an obvious fact that each of us has a history with people. This history does include conflict. Our conflict includes family, neighbors, co-workers, friends, etc. These conflicts have a history. That is, they are long term and they are deep; they are conflicts in which we have deep feelings of anger and resentment; and they are conflicts which cause us to explode over little incidents, exploding much more than you know is appropriate for such a little incident. This is often described as “pushing one’s button”.

For example, a sibling, while growing up teased you about your coordination every week. So when, as an adult, whenever teased about being coordinated the teasing brings back all those early childhood feelings and you overreact and explode. Your button has been pushed! The littlest incident results in a major explosion. This same principle holds true between religions, races, and governments. The list goes on.

The gospel lesson for today is a story about little incident that explodes because of a deep-seated conflict. It is a little known story about James and John. It is not one of the great classic stories from the Bible. In fact, it occurs only once, in the Gospel of Luke. It is the kind of story that is easily forgotten.

The story goes like this. Jesus was up north in Galilee, and he was getting ready to go down south to Jerusalem, and he had to pass through the land of Samaria. And the Jews and Samaritans, as you know the Jews and Samaritans didn’t like each other very much. It didn’t take much for them to set off against one another. I mean, they didn’t talk with each other or walk with each other; they didn’t intermingle or intermarry. And when a Jew was on a pilgrimage to come from northern Israel down to southern Israel, he had to pass through Samaria. The Samaritans and Jews often harassed each other. These kinds of events tend to be remembered.

Well, Jesus was getting ready to go down south, and he was going to go through Samaria, and he sent his disciples there in front of him, to make preparations. And he sent two of his disciples, James and John, into Samaria.

As you may remember from other Bible stories, these two brothers were called the “sons of thunder,” who had thunderous personalities, thunderous tempers, and thunderous prejudices. Jesus sent down the “sons of thunder” to Samaria.

James and John went to this small Samaritan village. They came to a little town in the road where prejudices run deep and real. And they went into that town and text says that they were not sufficiently “welcomed”, and that set the two hotheads off. Just a little thing; they were not properly welcomed, and that set the two of them off. It didn’t take much to set James and John off; it didn’t take much to make them mad. They came up to Jesus who had just entered the village and said: “Do you want us to call down the fires of hell and burn these people up? Let’s burn up those Samaritans, just like Elijah called on the fires of heaven to burn up those 400 priests of Baal.

A little of an over-reaction, we would say? Just because they hadn't been properly welcomed? Little incident? Big explosion? And the Bible says: "Jesus rebuked them;" James and John, that is. He strongly corrected them for their explosion of rage and feelings against the Samaritans. And Jesus said: "*That is not my Spirit, for the Son of Man came not to destroy, but to save other people.*" (Other ancient manuscripts)

William Barclay, the great English theologian, said that this passage in the Bible, although not well known, teaches tolerance like no other passage in the Bible. This passage is the best passage in the Bible that teaches tolerance.

This quick anger over little incidents happens all the time, like a person who pushes your button.. You have this long-term conflict; the littlest thing happens; and you go into a slow burn or a fast rage? If we are honest, there are a whole bunch of us who have long-term conflicts, and when reminded of them the littlest incident can set us off.

Does anyone here not have that happen? The littlest incident sets you off, and you know its not the little incident, but the thousand of similar little incidents which have happened before and this latest incident is merely the trigger? And when the person does the littlest thing to offend, the anger explodes over nothing.

Do you really like those feelings that are so easily triggered? Are those feelings, the ones so easily triggered, God pleasing? Are those easily triggered feelings inside; are they the Spirit of Christ? And so we listen to the word of God that says: "Create in me a clean heart O God, and put a new and a right spirit within me. Restore to me the joy of loving."

There is a story about Abraham Lincoln who many people think was the finest and most spiritual of all our presidents. During the Civil War, Abraham Lincoln was being criticized for not being harsh enough and severe enough on the soldiers of the South; and one time, after a battle, a general from the North came up to him and said: Why didn't you destroy your enemy? And President Lincoln answered with those famous words: "Do I not destroy my enemy by making him my friend?" The word of God had touched Abraham Lincoln's heart and we hear that in the words; "Do I not destroy my enemy by making him my friend?" That's what Jesus wants of us: to destroy our enemy by making him my friend.

I know that the feelings of anger and resentment run deep in many of your hearts today, and mine. There are some of you who have deep feelings of anger inside of you, where you wouldn't mind if such and such a person were punished immeasurably or had a string of bad luck happen to them. And Jesus says: "That is not my Spirit. Let me heal your heart."

AMEN