

THE FIFTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST: PROPER 8  
June 27, 2010

Luke 9:51-62

Our scripture readings present us today with a journey ending and a journey beginning. Elijah's mission comes to an end and Jesus' journey toward Jerusalem begins. Jesus sort of starts a 'teaching tour.' Prior to today's account in Luke's gospel, almost all of what happens in Jesus' life and ministry takes place in Galilee. But in today's passage, Jesus and his disciples leave on a road trip to Jerusalem. And, instead of taking the long bypass road from Galilee around Samaria to Jerusalem, Jesus sets his GPS to go the most direct way, right through the unfriendly towns and villages of Samaria, creating what will quickly become 'teachable moment' # 1 for his disciples.

Luke tells us that Jesus sent some of his disciples as messengers, to go ahead of the group to a Samaritan village, perhaps to find a place for food and overnight accommodations. But when the folks found out that Jesus was a Jewish rabbi heading toward Jerusalem, they 'did not receive him.' Jews and Samaritans bitterly hated each other - a hatred that existed hundreds of years before Jesus, so it shouldn't have been that big of a surprise to the messengers sent ahead of Jesus, that they would all be rejected by a Samaritan village. (Exactly how they rejected Jesus, we don't know.) But what we do know is that James and John, two of Jesus' closest disciples, are so angry and enraged at the Samaritans' disregard and disrespect for Jesus that their first reaction is to resort to hostility. "Lord, do you want us to bid fire come down from heaven and consume them?" they ask Jesus. For all we know, they were perhaps attempting to justify their intent to destroy the Samaritans by appealing to a story they all knew, of how the prophet Elijah had called down fire from heaven - a fire which consumed those who questioned the authority of God. Imagine their surprise when, instead of agreeing with them or passing judgment on the Samaritans, Jesus instead sternly rebukes James and John for their attitude and behavior. It's here where I think of the rabbis of old who would fill in the conversation that perhaps took place! I doubt they walked along the road in silence without speaking! Jesus probably took advantage of the opportunity to teach tolerance toward those who are different, tolerance of those whose path to God is not the same as theirs, tolerance toward those considered to be enemies. I'm reminded of a quote a friend of mine shared with me many years ago that I occasionally use when I hear people telling me in good faith to watch out for certain people they don't like or have good reason not to trust or simply just can't stand. And it's this: "I don't want my friends telling me who my enemies are." Jesus was doing that, and more than that, in rebuking James and John. He was showing, right from the start of his 'teaching tour,' that his mission or purpose in traveling even into Samaria, was not to call attention to himself but to proclaim the kingdom of God - and that this kingdom or reign of God was one of love and service, of sisterhood and brotherhood, in which each person is loved and respected because we are all created in God's image, even those who reject him. In time, the disciples would come to know that 'good' and 'Samaritan' were not incompatible and in witnessing Jesus' healing of ten lepers, they would be surprised to see that the only one

who returned to thank Jesus was a Samaritan. Jesus proclaims the kingdom, but he also brings the kingdom. It is already present with him and its power is at work in the world. Jesus' mission and message was much different in tone and content than that of Elijah or even John the Baptist. Jesus didn't come to judge us, preaching the wrath of God. He came to show us God's unconditional love through his actions and in his teachings, but he expects those who would seek to be his disciples to practice compassion through love and forgiveness, to embrace old enemies, rather than be angry disciples clinging to resentments over past wrongs. Jesus is a prophet demanding of his disciples an immediate response. He is also a teacher trying to help people think through their decisions.

The demands of discipleship can be rigorous and intense, requiring interior discipline not unlike the athletes we presently see participating in the World Cup in South Africa. In fact, watching some of the exciting games presently taking place in Nelson Mandela Stadium where the round of 16 began yesterday, reminds me of the film *Invictus*. Nelson Mandela (beautifully played by Morgan Freeman) takes a very different approach to his enemies after being elected president of South Africa following his 27 year imprisonment. Some of his followers wanted him to get even with their former oppressors but he was wise and patriotic enough to know that if his country were to emerge from the horrors of its racist past, reconciliation was needed so that the wounds might heal.

Among the first to see this policy of reconciliation implemented were the members of his presidential staff and team of bodyguards. Assembling the staff, Mandela tells them that any white person willing to work for him is welcome to keep their job. His bodyguards will include members of the old white security team. His black guards are very upset over this, one of them pointing out that some of them were no doubt the same ones who had beaten and tortured them during their own arrests years earlier. Mandela tells them that they will have to work together, a process that takes place very slowly as the film unfolds.

When he hears over the radio that the new sports federation committee is meeting to displace the white rugby national football team and even discard the old colors and name, Mandela drops what he is doing and rushes to the meeting hall. The members have just voted to do so, hating the team because of its association with the white Boers. His entrance is greeted with enthusiasm, but when he speaks, the mood in the room becomes tense. He asks them to rescind their action because it will drive a wedge of hostility between the races. What is needed now, he tells them, is for the two sides to come together. If both whites and blacks will root for the Springboks, this can be the beginning of their reconciliation. Very reluctantly they agree to take back their action and do so more because it is Nelson Mandela who asks them than because they agree with his view.

The president next sends an invitation to the captain of the rugby team, Francois Pienaar (played by a very convincing Matt Damon), to meet with him at his office. It's South Africa's turn to host the tournaments leading up to the World Cup and no one expects the team to advance very far, including the team members themselves. The captain is perplexed by the

president's invitation and his racist father makes disparaging remarks about Mandela. Nevertheless, Francois shows up. Mandela greets him warmly, serving tea and refreshments himself, discussing the nature of leadership and the upcoming World Cup games. He tells his guest of the poem "Invictus" that had kept alive his hope during his long period of imprisonment. Francois leaves the meeting with a newfound respect and admiration for the man whom his father had so disparaged.

As the film progresses, Nelson keeps in touch with Francois, dropping in during team practices to meet and talk with the players. He had apparently studied their pictures and names, because at their first meeting he is able to shake the hands of each one and greet him by name. Obviously inspired by their president, the team begins its winning streak. The team visits the prison on Robben Island where Mandela had been held so long, and in a moving scene, Francois stays behind to measure the cell, imagining the president reading and reciting the poem, a copy of which Mandela had sent to him written by his own hand. Still, when Francois suggest that they sing together the black national anthem, the white members refuse. They mellow, however, as they continue to win, and Mandela shows up for all of their games.

I don't need to tell the rest of the story. If you haven't seen the film, it's a very good contemporary cinematic parable which speaks of how the kingdom of God, already here but not yet fully realized, breaks into our lives offering reconciliation and hope for our world.

The message of the kingdom or reign of God is primarily a universal and divine call which excludes no one from the reconciling love of God which Jesus proclaimed by word and example in his earthly life.

The kingdom of God is not beyond us. It is within us, as unexpected grace, needing our eyes, our ears, our hands, our feet, our minds and our hearts and our very souls, through which Christ carries out his mission today.

Amen.

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