

Prayer of Preparation: Gracious God, let us hear you clearly when you call us to follow you. *Amen.*

Our gospel reading has an interesting title, one that I know that we are all familiar with. It's *Follow Me*. It's all about giving up what *we* want for our lives and following Jesus. While that sounds easy, we know it's not. It's not easy to follow Jesus at all because in the end, we are being asked to let go of everything we know and pick up a new way of living and being. Paul lays it out for us...to follow Jesus means we will follow the way of love.

Here's what the first disciples wanted to do. I want you to hear the gospel according to Luke with a fresh ear,

On their way they entered a village of the Samaritans to prepare for his arrival, but they did not receive him because his face was set toward Jerusalem. When his disciples James and John saw this, they said, “*Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?*” But he turned and rebuked them.

Jesus and the disciples are on the road and they're about to enter Samaritan territory, but the Samaritan's said...nope. Y'all can't come over here. Y'all can't come this way to go to Jerusalem. So you know what James and John said? Let's kill them all; let's bring down fire from heaven, kill them all, and burn their cities and towns to the ground. In their time with Jesus, James and John hadn't learned much because their response to following Jesus was...kill our enemies.

You may be asking yourself, why? Why such hatred that the Samaritans will not let the Jews pass and the Jews are ready to bring fire from heaven to kill them? In the simplest form, they disagreed over religion. I know you've *never* met people who've disagreed over religion, so let me share their thoughts with you.

Among the most significant differences between the Samaritans and the Jews is the site which they believe God chose for his dwelling. While the Jews hold that God chose Mount Zion in Jerusalem, Samaritans believe he chose Mount Gerizim near Shechem. After the Babylonian Exile, the Samaritans built a temple on Mount Gerizim, and the Jews built a temple on Mount Zion (*see* Temple of Jerusalem).

Jesus's response to the disciples was to rebuke them. Rebuke the ones whom he loved when their first thought was to kill their enemies. Here's what James and John should know: the greatest commandment is to *love the Lord your God with all your heart and love your enemy as you love yourself*.

Paul has a message for us about love and here it is: *For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery*. The slavery Paul is talking about is the hatred the disciples displayed in our gospel lesson. We cannot serve God and hate. It's as simple and as hard as that. We are called to freedom: freedom from hate and freedom to love.

Paul isn't talking about physical slavery, although I wholeheartedly agree that no peoples should be enslaved. No, Paul is talking about spiritual slavery which leads us to living lives which are not worthy of God's image imbedded deeply within us.

Here's Paul's list: sexual immorality, impurity, debauchery, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, etc. Paul says, put that mess away. Jesus, well Jesus rebukes it and says *follow me*. Jesus calls us to follow *his* way, a way of love which leads to peace.

The older I get, the clearer I see Jesus as he travelled to Jerusalem and taught the disciples a love which leads to peace. Paul puts that love into words.

Jesus left us the Spirit to lead and guide us. We will know we have adopted the Spirit, when we have adopted the love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control of Jesus.

Paul continues by saying, *For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters, only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become enslaved to one another. For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, “**You shall love your neighbor as yourself.**”*

As we celebrate our nation’s freedom this week, I want you to have our spiritual freedom at the forefront of your mind. I am ever grateful for the freedoms we have, but in Christ we are called to a greater freedom: a freedom to love as Jesus loved. We are freed by the Spirit of God to see God’s image in all we meet and to live lives of holiness as befitting God within us.

Response to the Word