

St. Paul's, Concord
June 29 & 30, 2019
Galatians 5:1,13-25; Luke 9:51-62
Rev. Kate Atkinson

Throughout the whole of Jesus' ministry on earth, he knew where he was going. He knew what was going to happen to him when he got there, and he knew there was no possibility of avoiding it. So you might have thought that the closer he got to Jerusalem, the more imminent his arrest and execution, the more agitated he would become. You might think that, with every step closer to his crucifixion, Jesus' feet would drag a little more.

But that isn't at all the image we find in this passage from Luke's gospel. Far from avoiding Jerusalem, Jesus becomes even more deeply resolved to go there and to face what's in store for him. As the time of his persecution and death approaches, he "sets his face" towards Jerusalem and he doesn't allow anything to divert him.

The Samaritan village that Jesus and his disciples pass through *could* have been a diversion. Because of the enmity that existed between the Jews and the Samaritans, it was common practice for Jewish travellers from Galilee to Judea to make a massive detour around the Samaritan territory, simply to avoid any confrontations. Again, you might have thought Jesus would choose to take that circuitous route – if only to delay his arrival in Jerusalem – but he does no such thing. And when both his advance messengers and his travelling party are snubbed by the Samaritan villagers, Jesus refuses to retaliate. James and John want to call on the power of God to punish their enemies, but Jesus won't hear of it. He rebukes his friends and moves them on to another, more hospitable village.

Although Jesus' behavior may appear unusual to us, James' and John's actions are all too familiar. We live in a vengeful society – one with daily incidents of road rage, domestic violence and litigation. Our world is dedicated to looking after number one, and it believes in punishment and payback. That's the kind of world Jesus and his disciples are living in too as they make their way to Jerusalem – where Jesus will face the ultimate punishment.

But, as we've seen, Jesus doesn't allow his approaching arrest, or his treatment by the Samaritans, to divert him from the path laid out by his Father. At no point in his ministry has Jesus ever bought into the corrupt values of the world, including the desire for self-preservation and the preoccupation with revenge. And he isn't going to start now. In fact, Jesus uses the journey to Jerusalem as an opportunity to teach a lesson in priorities.

Shortly after they move on from the Samaritan village, one of Jesus' followers makes a pledge of absolute loyalty to him – and Jesus reminds the man that there are no earthly benefits to making a commitment like that. The world looks for the material rewards that can come from associating with a celebrity – but Jesus makes it clear that even *he* doesn't even have a home of his own. The benefits of following him are entirely spiritual, and that makes them more precious than *any* form of worldly wealth.

Jesus also explains that the decision to follow him comes with a cost. Luke shares two examples, in his gospel, of men who want to delay their commitment to Christ while they deal with family matters. Although it's clear throughout the gospels that Jesus both honors and encourages responsibility to family, he also calls us to take an honest look at our motives when we use that responsibility as an excuse.

Like Jesus himself, whose face was set toward Jerusalem despite the obstacles and terrors that confronted him, there's no looking back when we choose to embrace the Christian life. There are real sacrifices to be made – including letting go of behaviors, priorities and values that are so much a part of the world we live in.

In the time of Moses, God's people were in desperate need of holy laws that regulated every aspect of their lives. But there's plenty of evidence throughout Scripture of how those laws were either abused or taken so literally that they did more harm than good. Jesus devoted his entire ministry to teaching God's people to internalize the one commandment that encompasses everything God requires of us: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

In his letter to the church at Galatia, Paul describes that commandment as a way the Galatians can live into the freedom Christ has won for them. And he warns them to avoid any influences that might prevent them from doing so. He calls those influences "desires of the flesh", and he makes it clear that they're in total opposition to the leading of the Spirit. Paul urges the Galatian Christians to live by standards that are different from those of the rest of the world. He implores them not to give in to the allure of the spirit of the age – which actually isn't all that different from the spirit of the age we live in now. And it's the same one Jesus' disciples struggled with on the road to Jerusalem.

For thousands of years, human behavior has been dominated by the "works of the flesh" that Paul lists in his letter. Incidents of greed and materialism, sexual immorality, intolerance, uncontrolled anger and hostility, impiety, excessiveness, infidelity, violence, self-indulgence – these are things that we read about on a daily basis or see on the internet or TV; and they're also things that we've all experienced, in one form or another, in ourselves.

But Jesus shows his followers that it's possible to live differently, to set one's face toward Jerusalem and not be distracted or influenced by anything else. And Paul's letter helps the young church of Galatia to understand what that means. When we set our face towards Jerusalem, we're choosing the way of the cross; we're choosing to crucify that part of us that's governed by uncontrolled passions and desires. And we're choosing instead to bring forth the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

The Laws of Moses were needed to provide the people of God with a blueprint for living a holy life, but the Spirit creates a *longing* in us to live that way. And the people around us notice the difference.

The Rt. Rev. Tom Wright, who preceded Justin Welby as Bishop of Durham, wrote this:

We of all people should know that we are called to live by a different Spirit. We have been seduced by the easy lie that we must be like the world in order to be relevant. Actually, the world desperately needs people who are different: who keep their integrity, their promises, their cool; who quietly demonstrate that there is a different way of being human, and that it makes you, and those around you, more human, not less. Tom Wright, *Church Times*, c. 1998

The fruits of the Spirit work together to restore and build up human relationships. They enable us to express love for one another, both neighbor and enemy, rather than constantly putting ourselves first.

This past week all the parochial clergy, administrators, and Safe Church Ministers in the diocese received a communication about the new and enhanced model policies for safeguarding the people we serve. Compliance with these policies fulfills the requirements of the Church Insurance Group, and protects the more vulnerable members of our communities. They ensure that clergy, staff, and laity know how to behave and to respond in challenging situations.

But there's another, very important reason for following rigorous guidelines for safe church, one that Bishop Rob shared with us not long after his Consecration. When people come to church, he told us, they expect to experience holiness. He wasn't talking about a nebulous atmosphere of holiness, he meant holiness personified in the people of God who make up our congregations. "Personal holiness," he said, "is the reality that we need to claim and reclaim in the context of a loving, holy God."

The people that we invite to come and see our parish; the people we serve in our Food Pantry and Chapter Two thrift shop; the people we meet in our daily lives and work; they all expect to see something different about us. In fact they *long* to see something different about us, to know that it's real, and to find out how they can have it for themselves.

Because God's Holy Spirit never stops reminding us that there *is* a better way.