

“Water is Thicker Than Blood”

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Luke 9.51-62

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It is good being on a university campus. I miss it.

I am one of many visitors here. The Duke Youth Academy is making its annual appearance. Fifty or so high school juniors and seniors are on campus for “a challenging and intensive encounter with Christian life.” That’s how the brochure puts it. I bet it’s true.

Being on a university campus, and seeing these soon to be university students, has me remembering my first day at college. We stuffed my parents’ car and set our faces toward my chosen university. After umpteen trips up the stairs, my dorm room was just so. Then Mom and Dad took me out for the last supper. I remember the return trip to campus and how I dreaded the long anticipated goodbye.

It’s completely different, I realize, yet the disciples surely had some creeping sense of their journey to goodbye with Jesus. Luke makes it emphatically clear that Jesus was on a journey, and his disciples with him, and that the journey would lead to goodbye. “When the days drew near for Jesus to be taken up.” This is how Luke begins the story. It is the *when* of this story. It is an obvious allusion to Elijah’s being “taken up.”

“When the days drew near for Jesus to be taken up he set his face to go to Jerusalem.” If a journey to goodbye is the *when* of the story, Jerusalem is the *where* of the story. Jesus isn’t headed to Rome or to Athens but to Jerusalem, the city of David, home to the temple, centerpiece on Judaism’s table.

Now before we say another thing, we remember that this single verse marks a shift in Luke’s entire gospel. Everything that has happened before finds its meaning in everything that is about to happen. In literature it is called a turning point. In rhetoric it is called the fulcrum. In scripture it means that things are happening for a reason. Jesus is taking his disciples to Jerusalem for a reason.

And there’s a problem. They must pass through Samaria. This is a problem for two reasons.

First, Samaria isn’t actually between them and Jerusalem, not geographically anyway, which tells us that Luke is giving us truth, not facts. Never let facts get in the way of truth.

The second reason that a Samaria pass-thru is problematic is that Samaria is where Samaritans live. We remember the Samaritans, as in the Good Samaritan, as in the Parable, of. Jesus once shocked his Jewish audience by illustrating moral goodness with a Samaritan. It was shocking because by Jesus’ time, Jews and Samaritans had feuded for hundreds of years, ever since the Assyrians had invaded the land and marched the Jews off to exile. What is more, the Assyrians had re-colonized the Jewish homeland with prisoners from other lands. With a little time and a lot of necessity, the remaining Jews had mixed and mingled with the foreigners. Their Jewish culture – and families – had become intertwined. Hundreds of years passed.

To Jews the compromise was scandalous. The Samaritans had mixed bloodlines. They had watered down the faith. From the Jewish perspective, Samaritans had polluted the family. They had sold out, given up.

Given Jewish indignation, you could reasonably predict some small Samaritan defensiveness. The Samaritans had as little use for Jews as they offered to them. Samaritans saw themselves as the true Abrahamic inheritors. After all, they had done what they had to, had kept the faith, had watched the land.

The Jewish family was divided. They even worshipped separately. Jews worshipped in Jerusalem. Samaritans worshipped on Mount Gerizim. Jews and Samaritans, cousins and unhappy about it, had no use for the other.

We can imagine the reception offered Jerusalem Jews on their pilgrimage to the Temple, traipsing through Samaria. When Jesus sent his disciples ahead, their rejection in a Samaritan village should come as no surprise. It isn’t particularly surprising, either, that James and John offered a consuming fire from heaven. They were remembering Elijah, of course. Elijah did that once. He called down fire on his enemies.

“Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?” *‘Hey boss, you want we should rough ‘em up a little?’*

But James and John were not thugs. They were disciples, or supposed to be. They had already forgotten what Jesus told them to do in such situations. “Wherever they do not welcome you, as you are leaving that town shake the dust off your feet.” No fire. No brimstone. No napalm, no pilotless drones, no violence. Jesus simply refused violence as a penalty for rejection. Instead, he said, Do nothing. Leave. Shake the dust off.

Then Jesus rebuked his disciples.

That’s a muscular word – rebuke. Elsewhere in Luke Jesus rebukes the wind, rebukes fevers, rebukes demons, but he does not rebuke his disciples. Only here. They will not do violence in his name.

Now you might think that this is the end of the story. It is tidy, I’ll hand it to you, to think of this bit of scripture as an exposition against religiously sanctioned violence. And it is.

Yet linking it with what follows expands our thoughts. Taken as a whole, today’s passage may be more about family, and about how choices can build authentic family, and about how big our family can become if we choose to follow Jesus and join God’s family.

So the very next verse rushes us to yet another village. Jesus meets three people contemplating their own journeys. They are considering joining Jesus’ family. They are thinking of following Jesus on his way to Jerusalem.

The first said to Jesus, “I will follow you wherever you go.”

Do you remember the Navy’s old recruiting slogan? “It’s not just a job. It’s an adventure.” Now *that’s* recruiting. The first step is to excite the prospect, motivate the recruit, convince the apprentice that the task will be enjoyable and rewarding. Recruiters know – if they are recruiting for the Navy or for downtown law firms, whether recruiting for the Duke Admission Office or for the Evangelism Committee– first describe the joys of joining, the benefits of belonging.

The second step is to *close the deal*. Keep it positive. Keep mum about the downside. If at all possible, avoid talking about the possibility of being shot at in foxholes, the long hours at the office, the high price of tuition, the cost of discipleship.

Step one, motivate. Step two, consummate.

The first disciple wannabe said to Jesus, “I will follow you wherever you go.”

Step one, complete. Check.

“And Jesus said to him, “Foxes have holes, birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.”

Jesus would make a sorry recruiter.

Jesus invited another, “Follow me.” But [the man] said, “Lord, first let me go and bury my father.”

That’s an altogether reasonable request, wouldn’t you say? “Honor thy father and mother,” the commandment has it. Surely following Jesus will wait while he tends to sacred family details. Surely following Jesus *includes* his tending to sacred family details.

“But Jesus said to him, “Let the dead bury their own dead; as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God.”

My mother was dying on Easter morning. That’s what I told my congregation before bolting to her bedside after rushing the benediction. We put her on hospice care the next day. Two Sundays ago – nine weeks later – Mom went to church. She hasn’t looked this good in months.

For the Christian there are worse things than death, which means that there are more important things than death, and following Jesus must take precedence over all of it.

This is what I mean to suggest by observing that this non-violent march through Samaria and Jesus’ conversations with three possible followers has something to do with defining family, at least family as it is capable of being.

Last Sunday was Father’s Day. It’s an awkward moment liturgically because families fold into sanctuaries in order to worship with Dad, only some family’s worship dad, deify dad. Make no mistake; there are plenty of families which make of themselves and their identities nothing short of idols. That’s why Father’s Day – and Mother’s Day too, for that matter – get murky, liturgically speaking.

How do we keep our commitments clear?

You remember Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the Lutheran pastor who opposed and was then martyred by the Nazis in World War II. Bonhoeffer is famous not for his execution but for his faithfulness right up to it. He is famous for his teaching about “cheap grace” and for his remarkable witness concerning the cost of discipleship. That’s the name of his best read book, in fact, *The Cost of Discipleship*.

Eric Metaxas has just written a new biography of Bonhoeffer. I bought a copy for my dad, for Father’s Day. I went to visit him last weekend. I forgot to take the book.

I guess that the cost of discipleship will have to wait ... except that for Jesus, it won’t. That’s the point. Jerusalem awaits.

We might lump these three exchanges together as being about the cost of discipleship. Here’s how your bulletin cover puts it. “Jesus makes clear that discipleship is a radical act.” Jesus tells people “that they cannot cling to their former lives and serve God’s kingdom.”

Following Jesus must leap not just our lesser commitments. Following Jesus will supersede even our best commitments, even – believe it or not – even our commitments to family. Because – never mind what Hallmark says – family is not an end to itself. Like every other human relationship, at their best, family relationships are gifts from God to help us be faithful in our most important relationship ... our relationship with God, our friendship with God, our ongoing walk with God, our journey in growth towards God.

Which is why, when the third inquirer finally reached Jesus, he said, “I will follow you, Lord; but let me first say farewell to those at my home.”

Jesus has learned nothing about consummating the recruitment deal.

Jesus might have said, “Welcome!” He might have said, “Glad you’re here!” He might even have said, “Do you accept Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior, and do you promise to be a faithful member of the church, giving of yourself in every way?” (That’s how Presbyterians close the deal.)

Why have Christians begun asking one another to accept Jesus rather than to follow Jesus?

Only Jesus isn’t seeking to consummate the recruitment deal. He is seeking followers. Jesus is forging a family worthy of the name. So Jesus said none of these things. Instead he said, “No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.”

The family Jesus is forging is the most beautiful family because it always points beyond itself, points to God. The finest families offer their members a roadmap to God.

The sermon title is a play on that saying that “blood is thicker than water.” That’s the old proverb that means – this is how Wikipedia says it – “the bonds of family ... are stronger than ... bonds between unrelated people.”

It’s a German proverb. The people who wrote this proverb authored also the Holocaust, and paradoxically they produced also Dietrich Bonhoeffer, which only illustrates that the Samaritans and Jews were long ago part of a very lengthy human conversation asking what most tightly binds us together.

Turns out, the answer isn’t blood – neither its spilling nor its purification. We are not most tightly bound by ethnic density, nor cultural cohesion, nor righteous ritual.

We are bound by water. Baptismal water signifies God’s decision for us and our decision for God. When we choose to follow Jesus, we join the family of those who also follow – however imperfectly, however haltingly – and we find that water is thicker than blood.

I began this sermon acknowledging fifty high schoolers here to encounter Christian life. It reminded me of my first day at college. My dorm room was ready. We had just eaten. We drove back to campus.

Now you need to know that my twin sister and I have three older siblings. Mom and Dad had done this before, taken kids to college.

How I dreaded the coming scene, Mom, leaping from the car, throwing her arms around me; Dad, unfolding Mother’s whitened knuckles from my shoulders, fighting back the tears; the upper classmen, lining the parking lot, smirking at my family’s farewell scene. How I dreaded it.

Dad stopped the car. I got out. I closed the door.

They drove away. Dad put his hand to the wheel and never looked back.

There were two messages.

First, my parents were really okay with my leaving home! Second, with one family far away, down the road, I had choices to make.

One family prepared me.
The family of faith awaited me.
Would I choose to follow Jesus? Joining God's family would be consistently hard. It would cost me.
Would I follow?
That was the question. It is still our question. It is always our question.