

So you want to be great. A sermon preached at St. Giles' Presbyterian Church, Prince George, BC on March 26, 2017 by Rev. Herb Hilder.

Lessons; MATTHEW 20:20-28
LUKE 9:51-56

A story is told about the late Muhammed Ali at the height of his fame as a world class boxer.

No doubt there are many stories – for Ali was that sort of person – larger than life

The 'greatest' was on a plane and the stewardess asked him to buckle his seat belt.

He replied, "Superman don't need no seat belt" Without missing a beat, she quickly replied, "Superman don't need no airplane either."

Ali buckled up!

In his day, Ali was a great athlete in the boxing ring and had an ego bigger than a house. His tag line of "

Float like a butterfly, sing like a bee
The hands can't hit what the eyes can't see

Was not an exaggeration

Add to that, Ali was not someone who was backward about being forward!

I think in many ways, Muhammed Ali and the apostle James were kindred spirits.

For both were bold, ambitious, passionate about what they did and 'thunderous'.

Not the sort of people you would invite for a quiet conversation or a small dinner party – for both would overwhelm any gathering!

Of the 3 disciples of Jesus' so called inner circle of Peter, James and John, James is the least familiar to us

There is not a lot of descriptive detail or narrative background in the Bible about James.

He is not a stand-alone character,

But is always paired with his younger and better known brother, John.

What we know about James is this.

He was the elder of the two brothers who grew up in a very prominent local family

I wonder if this made James feel that by all rights he ought to have been the chief apostle.

I wonder if that is the reason there were so many disputes among the disciples about who should be the greatest.

What evidence we have of James reflect that he was a strong,

Take charge person – probably only second in influence to Peter.

From this morning's reading from Luke – James had a fiery, no nonsense attitude toward those who crossed him or his mission with Jesus.

The scriptures also remind us that James along with Peter and John,

Experienced first-hand things the other disciples did not.

For example,

James is physically present when Jesus raises Jairus' daughter from the dead

James, Peter and John, witnessed Jesus' glory on the Mount of Transfiguration.

James is among the 4 disciples who privately question Jesus on the Mount of Olives

He is included again with John and Peter when the Lord urged those three to pray with Him in Gethsemane.

Add these first hand experiences with Jesus to a personality known to be passionate, fervent and zealous – for he and his brother John are already known as Sons of Thunder – and you have James the apostle of Jesus.

Ever met a 'Son of Thunder' type of person? I have.

Over the years, I have met and worked with people in communities of faith and outside them that

would fit the mold of James

People who are fervent and take charge,

Passionate about their beliefs and often cannot see why the rest of us are not as passionate.

Most are very gifted people – though some do have a heightened sense of their own importance with very little to be self-important about.

Their zeal – which in theory is commendable – is not tempered by wisdom.

Often it gets laced with great amounts of insensitivity.

The result is often cruelty toward others, loosely disguised as speaking the truth in love.

Or at times their Godly zeal disintegrates into uncontrolled passion – as is the case with James and John's outburst about what should be done to the Samaritans who have rebuffed Jesus – the Luke lesson.

Sidebar.

We need to remember that the Samaritans and Jews not only did not like each other – they hate each other.

Most Jews therefore travelling between Galilee and Jerusalem take a route that requires them to travel many miles through desert and to cross the Jordan twice – just so they could avoid Samaria!

Why the animosity between Jews and Samaritans?

The Samaritans were a mixed raced offspring of Israelites from the Northern Kingdom.

When Israel was conquered by the Assyrians – 100's of years before Jesus' time,

The most prominent and influential people in their tribes were taken into captivity and the land is resettled with pagan and foreigners who were loyal to the Assyrian king (II Kings 17:24-34)

Poor Israelites who remained in the land intermarried with these pagans.

Over time,

Those dwelling in Samaria founded their own
priesthood,

And built their own temple.

In short, they made a new religion based in large
part on pagan tradition.

Classic example of what happens when the
authority of scripture is subjugated to human
tradition.

So the entire region is seen as unclean by the
Jews.

But all this is secondary to Jesus who always treats
the Samaritans with respect.

Jesus needs to get to Jerusalem sooner rather than
later – so he is not going to go the circuitous route!

Along the way, He and his followers will
need places to eat and spend the night.

So he sends an advance team ahead – I like to think
the advance team includes Philip – our obsessed
with facts and figures disciple!

The Samaritans though essentially say – ‘can’t
stay here’. No room here

For the worship that takes place in Jerusalem is
despised by them

They have no interest in Jesus’ agenda.

In fact, Jesus represents everything Jewish that they
despise!

This snubbing of Jesus triggers a nasty
reaction in James and John

**Lord, do you want us to command fire to come
down from heaven and consume them? (vs. 54)**

“fire from heaven” is a reference to one of the Elijah
stories in II Kings.

Like most of the Elijah stories – it’s a good one
Stubbornness of a pagan king is met by the power
of God which takes the form of fire coming down
from heaven and consuming, reducing to ashes in a
moment,
Soldiers sent 3 times to bring back under force
Elijah.

This Elijah action I see as akin to the final
showdown between the Nazis and Indiana Jones in
Steven Spielberg’s – Raiders of the Lost Ark.
In which a group of Nazis who refuse to
understand that the power of God is not something
with which to be tampered – the result – whoosh!
The area where they are is swept clean as if they
had never existed.

The sheer arrogance of James and John in
declaring their question

**Lord, do you want us to command fire to come
down from heaven and consume them? (vs. 54)**

Is almost laughable

In their zeal they have forgotten their place.

That they do not have the power of God

And consume them – for what – snubbing Jesus

James and John probably thought they were
standing on a solid precedent.

Yet, their motivation is wrong, wrong wrong.

Little wonder that Jesus rebukes them
 I wonder what Jesus said in his rebuke.
 I like to believe it was along the lines that loving
*kindness and mercy are virtues to be cultivated as much
 as (and sometimes more than) righteous indignation and
 fiery zeal.*

Righteous indignation and fiery zeal can be
 whipped up in an instant.
 Loving kindness and mercy require a more careful
 and graceful consideration of raw facts.
 They require a long view and balanced perspective
 on life.

The Matthean reading this morning displays
 James and John's *insensitivity and obtuseness to what
 Jesus is telling them.*
 As in Philip's question we looked at last week.
 A question as you remember displayed with crystal
 clarity Philip's inability to process what he had seen
 and been witness to,
 So here in Matthew 20, James and John's r mother's
 request to Jesus echoes the same sort of obtuseness.
 I believe James and John set their mother up!

Jesus recently has promised those who follow
 him will sit on a throne.
 James and John's heightened sense of their own
 importance and supreme overconfidence take over
 and they demand further clarification on the matter
 of the thrones.
 Mom's request is actually their request.

**Declare that these two sons of mine will sit one at
 your right and one at your left in your kingdom,**

Jesus does not make that promise – for only His
 Father can do this.

What he does say is “you have no idea what
 you are asking. Are you capable of drinking the cup
 that I am about to drink?

Without a second thought, James and John
 reply – Sure, why not?”

In time,
 Both James and John will understand and see what
 they cannot now
 They shall indeed drink from the same cup as Jesus
 But it shall not be a cup of glory, power,
 prominence in this world, lording over others.
 Rather, it will be about suffering, servanthood and
 for James – martyrdom.

For the present, Matthew tells us that
 the other 10 disciples were angry with James and
 John.
 I wonder were the 10 other disciples angry because
 of the request made OR because they had not
 thought of the ‘preferred seats’ first.

And before we finger wag and tut tut about
 the disciples, take a good look at the mirror the lives
 of the disciples raise in front of each of us

Each one of us has a competitive gene, a gene that sometimes operates in the ascendancy in our wanting to get ahead,
 Look good at any cost,
 Look out for number !
 How often has getting ahead in some area of our lives been a major motivation in things we do and say?

What do then this morning's lessons say to us?
 James and John came from a prominent family. Jesus though does not choose them owing to their worldly wealth and status
 Rather, he chooses James for his zeal, his passion, his courage and his sheer energy
 James has good and just leader potential.
 When Jesus chooses him,
 He knows James will need some molding, some humbling, some correction, and some Godly perspective on his actions and the world in which he lives.
 Is that not true of each of us?

*Wealth or power in this world does not give us special status with Jesus.
 All of us stand on equal footing at the Cross.*

James' action and suggestion as to how to 'handle' the Samaritan situation *shows how zeal and passion*

*about the things and ways of Jesus –which are both good – can be turned on their ear,
 Unless tempered by the grace and love of God.
 Judgmental or ill-considered action ALWAYS undermines the spread of the Gospel – ALWAYS.*

Guard your thought life in this particular area-for even if we would never admit it publicly, I think most of us at one time or another in our life wish God would smote a person or a group owing to the fact that our sensibilities, opinions and attitudes have been offended.

The request for James and John to sit nearer to Jesus becomes a Segway for Jesus to remind his followers that to follow him means *to be a servant to others.*
 Following Jesus does not mean lording it over people,
 Judging who is in and who is out;
 Or being nauseously pietist
 The world sees power in terms of a triangle – the higher you go the more people who are under you. Jesus' ways turn the triangle upside down – the closer you get to the apex – the more people you carry in love, care and support.

Think of the words of the hymn with which this short series began 4 weeks ago –
 A series of questions posed –*Will you come and follow me. #634*

Will you come and follow me, if I but call your name?
 Will you go where you don't know and never be the same?
 Will you let my love be shown, will you let my name be known,
 Will you let my life be grown in you and you in me?

Or the words of the hymn on the opposite page--

#635 Brother, sister let me serve you

One of the hymns sung at Veronica and Richard's wedding -most appropriate as a wedding hymn.

Most appropriate as we consider what following Jesus really means

Verse 1 then verse 3

Brother, sister, let me serve you, let me be as Christ to you,

Pray that I may have the grace to let you be my servant too.

I will hold the Christ light for you in the nighttime of your fear,

I will hold my hand out to you; speak the peace you long to hear.

Like the other disciples we have looked at and will look at until Easter Sunday.

At this point in the story, James has not quite got what following Jesus REALLY MEANS

No matter how long it is since we first said, yes, I will follow Jesus,
 I wonder how many of us have really got it yet
 I wonder how many of us are still too often beguiled by the voices of the world that are ever present and every strong.

Somewhere along the way, James learned to use his courage, zeal and commitment to really and fully serving the Lord,
 Rather than for his own self-aggrandizement
 May that be our prayer for ourselves as we continue to follow Jesus – lifting him up that all may see Him.

AMEN