

I've always thought of James and John as wide-open, rough-and-tumble Irish-twins. Close in age, loud, boisterous, unruly, inseparable,...you know, always getting into trouble. **Always** in the middle of something. They are the Sons of Thunder, after all!

I imagine when Jesus called them to follow, their mom and dad might have been like exasperated parents dropping off their wild children at summer camp. Their world now more still and quiet than they could imagine.

Did Jesus **REALLY** know what he was getting into when he called those two to follow?!?!

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In some ways, who could blame their reaction in this situation? They had just seen Jesus transfigured with Moses and Elijah on the mount, radiant with holy fire. They would have remembered Elijah bringing fire down on his enemies on two different occasions.

I mean, it's what we do right? We are so good at drawing lines and putting someone else on the other side. We pit ourselves against our real, or even perceived, enemies. Put a stake, or a flag, in the ground. Use demeaning language and names. We are professionals at other-ing, trying to put someone under the heel of our boot. **We weaponize our words.**

Further, our culture and world today is full of war language and imagery...if not just outright war itself. Trade wars, culture wars, the war on terror, the war on gangs, the war on drugs, the war on Christmas, the war on plastic, the war on journalists, the war on science, ...

War-like rhetoric in society and daily-life feels oversaturated, and yet, it is how we often engage: around principles of conflict, attack, and defense.

**We thirst for power, status, and victory...triumphal tribalism is our addictive cocktail.**

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This Samaritan village had slighted Jesus and his followers. What else do you do when confronted with disrespect and conflict? Assert your power? Make a statement? Send a message...Unleash the power of God and bring down fire?

Jesus refuses.

Only earlier in this very chapter of Luke, Jesus had taught his followers to receive hospitality where it is offered, and if it was refused, to shake the dust off their feet and move on.

Vengeance. Retaliation. Violence. These are not the vision of Jesus.

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Oddly enough, the only reason Luke gives for the Samaritan rejection is this: that Jesus had set his face toward Jerusalem.

Honestly, I still do not know what it means to connect these two. But when something is repeated, we know that it must be important. And so, what may be central to this narrative is not the rejection itself, but rather, the laser-focus resolve of the mission of Jesus.

And that is the glue of this whole narrative.  
The urgency. The resolve. The mission.

The Greek literally says, "he hardened his face to go..."

Jesus has set his face, hardened his face, on a mission for redemption, grace, mercy, and love.

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When we look at the second half of the narrative, these requests, under normal circumstances, would seem reasonable. Burying a family member, bidding farewell to those you love...these are not extreme or inappropriate. And I must ask, does the contrast with Elijah continue on purpose? After all, Elijah allowed Elisha to bid farewell to his family before joining the prophet in ministry. Is this about the demand? I don't think so. I believe it is about the compelling call and urgency of the mission of Jesus.

Jesus will not, he cannot be diverted, drawn away from, or even held up on his way to Jerusalem. His mission is too vital and there will be no compromise.

Talk about a message...this was, in some ways, maybe more disarming and jarring than bringing down fire. But there's also a sense of truth-in-advertising...they know what they are getting into.

To reject violence, to walk a path of vulnerability and uncertainty, to give up concerns of self and refuse comfort, to put the desires and needs of others before your own, to embrace suffering and death for the sake of love....those who put their feet to the path that is the way of Jesus will be under no illusions what it could mean for them.

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The whole of the world and all that we undertake, all that we do, look mightily different through the lens of God's love and grace. Everything – friendships, family, work, priorities, enemies, disagreements – everything looks different when viewed through the lens of God's sacrificial love.

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I've previously shared stories from Jesuit priest Gregory Boyle and his ministry, Homeboy Industries. He is often asked: "What's it like to have enemies working together?"<sup>1</sup> He says it is almost always tense at first.

'Clever' seemed eager to begin working at Homeboy Silkscreen. At 22, he was ready to retire from gang life. As he toured the factory, he shook hands cheerfully, even greeting enemies and looking them in the eye. But when he turned the corner and saw Travieso, a 24 year-old from an enemy hood, they refused to shake hands or even look at one another. Boyle says, "If you can't hang working together – please let me know. I gotta grip a' homies who would love to have this job." They say nothing.

6 months later, Travieso finds himself surrounded in an alley by an enemy gang and gets beat up badly. They don't stop until he is lifeless. He ends up at the hospital where he is declared brain dead and left on life support. The doctors wait 48 hours to secure a flat read. This also allows friends and family to travel to Los Angeles.

Boyle had been speaking out of town, and flies home. He smears oil on his badly disfigured forehead and those gathered say goodbye.

The next day, Boyle is in his office late and the phone rings. It's Clever.

"Hey, that's messed up... 'bout what... happened to Travieso."

"Yeah, it is," Boyle says, sitting in the midst of a deep grief.

"Is there anything I can do?" Clever asks, with oddly high energy, "Can I give him my blood?"

Boyle says this last offer sucks the breathable air out of the atmosphere. They both tremble...

"He...was...not...my...enemy. He was my friend. We...worked together."

Boyle quotes the poet Rumi: "Close both eyes to see with the other eye."

When we do so, he says, "we are no longer saddled by the burden of our persistent judgments, our ceaseless withholding, our constant exclusion. Our sphere has widened, and we find ourselves, quite unexpected, in a new, expansive location, in a place of endless acceptance and infinite love."

Boyle says that when we find ourselves in that place, we have wandered into God's jurisdiction.

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The great reformer, Martin Luther, wrote in his commentary on Galatians: "In justification God hath stirred up in your bodies a strife and a battle; the flesh and the spirit are at war with the other."<sup>2</sup>

See...the war is finished. Victory has been declared.

But the kingdom continues to unfold, and so far as we can tell and through what we experience, is that the struggle continues to play out between our spirit and flesh.

The Holy Spirit, God's own first gift for those who believe, whispers in *our* spirits: you are redeemed, you are saved, you are claimed...live according to the Spirit, love your neighbors, and seek the higher authorities of faith and charity.

The war is finished. Victory has been declared.  
Thanks be to God, Jesus Christ is risen!

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And that brings me back to fire.

We get them out of order in our lectionary, but I think we are to remember another scene in which Luke tells the story of fire coming down from heaven: the day of Pentecost...when the Holy Spirit descended as tongues of flame upon the followers of Jesus.

The true fire that comes down from heaven is intended to embolden us in our confession of God's love and grace.

The true fire that comes down from heaven is intended to reconnect us with one another, to enable us to hear and see one another, to care for one another, and to bind us together as the people of God.

James and John are our reminder that when we feel that burning desire to draw a line in the sand and call down the fire of vengeance on another....

Jesus refuses... and calls us to harden our face toward God's jurisdiction, God's sacrificial love; calling down a fire of love and grace that will bridge the widest of divides.

And that's when we find ourselves in the jurisdiction of the God whose property is to always have mercy.

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<sup>1</sup> Boyle, Gregory. *Tattoos on the Heart*. New York: Free Press, 2010. The following anecdotes and quotes are from pages 142-145.

<sup>2</sup> <https://mbird.com/2019/06/rise-up-what-not-to-do-when-there-is-a-war-on-everything/>