

Three Little Words

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Sermon for July 1, 2007

Lessons for Pentecost 5, Lectionary 13 in Year C

1 Kings 19:15-16, 19-21

Psalm 16

Galatians 5:1, 13-25

Luke 9:51-62

Three little words. No, not the old movie with Fred Astaire, Debbie Reynolds, and Red Skelton - although maybe I'll rent it someday. Three little words from today's Gospel lesson, which as Robert Frost might say, have made, or should make, all the difference.

What are those three little words? Well, you'll have to wait a little bit while you get a brief history lesson.

Who were the Samaritans? We hear so much about them in the New Testament, specifically in the Gospels. But who were they, and are they still around today?

For starters we know that the Samaritans and the mainstream Israelites didn't get along. In John 4 we're told that one of the reasons is because they believe that God should be worshipped on Mt Gezirim, and not in Jerusalem. I can see where that might cause a few problems. A quick check at Wikipedia shows that because they were an offshoot from mainstream Judaism, their religion and practices are very similar, although not exactly the same. One of the big differences was that whole Mt Gezirim vs Jerusalem thing. We're also told that today there are only about 700 Samaritans left.

The Samaritans show up quite a few times in the Gospels, usually as a surprising example of someone having great faith, or doing the right thing - in contrast to the followers of the mainstream Judaism of the time. The classic example, the Good Samaritan, occurs just one chapter after today's Gospel reading, and it should be noted that word "good" in "Good Samaritan" is not merely there to say that he was a generally nice guy, but instead to say, "Yeah, he was a Samaritan, but he was good. In fact, he was better than the rest of you guys."

Later on, in Luke 17, we have the story of the 10 lepers, where the only one to come back and thank Jesus was, you guessed it, a Samaritan.

Jesus seemed to love using the Samaritans as examples of how things ought to be - despite, and maybe because of the fact that they were generally despised by most of mainstream Judaism.

So, as today's lesson says, as Jesus was preparing to go to Jerusalem, he was not well received in a Samaritan village on the way. Hmm...I wonder why. Upon seeing this, his disciple John asked if he wanted them to

command fire to come down from Heaven to destroy the village.

And then came the three little words.

Has anyone here every heard of Emo Phillips? Cheryl and I first discovered him about 15 years ago as we were watching stand-up comedy on TV. He was a very thin, very strange looking guy with weird hair, weird mannerisms, and a sing-songy voice. He told this story about a man he saw on the Golden Gate bridge, contemplating suicide:

I said, "Do you believe in God?" and he said, "I do believe in God."

I said, "Are you a Christian or a Jew?" He said, "A Christian."

I said, "Me too. Protestant or Catholic?" He said, "Protestant."

I said, "Me too! What franchise?" He says, "Baptist."

I said, "Me too! Northern Baptist or Southern Baptist?" He says, "Northern Baptist."

I said, "Me too! Northern Conservative Baptist or Northern Liberal Baptist?" He says, "Northern Conservative Baptist."

I say, "Me too! Northern Conservative Fundamentalist Baptist or Northern Conservative Reform Baptist?" He says, "Northern Conservative Fundamentalist Baptist."

I say, "Me too! Northern Conservative Fundamentalist Baptist Great Lakes Region or Northern Conservative Fundamentalist Baptist Eastern Region?" He says, "Northern Conservative Fundamentalist Baptist Great Lakes Region."

I say, "Me too! Northern Conservative Fundamentalist Baptist Great

Lakes Region Council of 1879 or Northern Conservative Fundamentalist Baptist Great Lakes Region Council of 1912?" He says, "Northern Conservative Fundamentalist Baptist Great Lakes Region Council of 1912."

I said, "Die, heretic!" And I pushed him over!

They were so close. They were so darned close. I'm willing to say that they had about a 95% match. But that 1912 versus 1879 thing was enough to make Phillips call the other guy a heretic and push him over.

How often do we do that? How often do we focus intently on the one or two things that divide us while ignoring the hundreds, maybe even thousands of things that unite us. Eric Richardson can tell anyone who asks the sad and scandalous story of how there were once three different Lutheran churches on three opposite corners in Syracuse. Not because they were originally German, Danish, and Norwegian congregations with different languages and traditions. But instead, because of a disagreement in the first congregation which led to a split, and a later disagreement in the second which led to another split.

What is it about us that seems to demand total agreement and 100% match? What is it about us that wants to call anyone who isn't totally with us all the way our enemy? What is it about us that wants to call down fire from Heaven to destroy those who aren't with us all the way - even though they may be with us for 95% of it?

Recent studies in DNA have shown that we are more than 99% alike, and that the things that make us so obviously different, and

that we seem to pay the most attention to, make up less than 1% of our genetic coding.

That's right - the code that makes me black, Deanna white, and Theresa Asian makes up less than 1% of the DNA in each of us. Even more surprising, though, is the fact that if you did a sampling of the DNA of each member of King of Kings, you might find that my genetic roots have more in common with Peter Pavlacka's Slovak background than with Jerry Holland's African background. And yet think of how many years, how many centuries, we've divided ourselves based on the 1% that coded for the obvious differences, while ignoring the 99% we had in common. Think of how often people have wanted to call down fire from Heaven to destroy others based on that 1% difference.

Upon seeing that Jesus was not well received in the Samaritan village, John asked if they should call down fire from Heaven to destroy it. And that's when the three little words happened. Are you ready, because now you're finally gonna get them:

He rebuked them.

OK, so strictly speaking, the text says, "He turned and rebuked them," but for some reason "Five Little Words" isn't as great of a hook as "Three Little Words," so we'll go with the paraphrase here of, "He rebuked them."

This is important stuff here. Jesus seems to be saying that you don't go around desiring to destroy people simply because they don't totally agree with you. Jesus recognized that the Samaritans had much in common

with the rest of the Israelites, and that while their temple may have been in the wrong place, their hearts were perhaps in the right place. Remember, again, how many times Jesus uses Samaritans as examples of the way things should be done.

Upon hearing that the guy on the bridge was a 1912 Baptist rather than an 1879 one, Jesus wouldn't have pushed him over. In fact, Jesus probably wouldn't have even asked if he was a Baptist at all. He simply would've offered his hand and pulled him away from the edge.

Jesus is able to handle all the ambiguity that we poor humans seem totally unable to deal with. We seem to need things in simple yes/no, true/false, black/white form, and find it very hard to deal with the fact that life is full of grey areas, full of "yes, but" situations, and times when something is mostly true, however...

Let me say this again: He rebuked them. He told them, and us by extension, to not desire to destroy those who aren't totally with our particular program - even when it's in his name. Oh, we may think that things will run more smoothly, and that we could better do his will if we could only get rid of those pesky people who don't see it our way. But maybe that's not the way it is. Maybe that's not the way he wants it. Maybe that pesky person is there to give us some perspective that we so desperately need. Even if they have no new perspective to give us, maybe Jesus loves them anyway.

And here's the hard part: Maybe we're that pesky person to someone else, and maybe they're wishing that fire would come down from Heaven to destroy us.

Jesus rebuked them. But the lesson doesn't seem to have taken well. I'm not surprised though. When you think about how well his lessons took among people who actually had him with them to keep correcting them, is it any wonder that we continually get it wrong now?

Perhaps, maybe instead of desiring fire to come down and destroy those with whom we disagree, we should follow the example of Jesus and do a bit of rebuking ourselves.

Think of the terrible image Christianity has among outsiders - all because of the more vocal Christians who don't hesitate to try to call down fire from Heaven at every opportunity, usually with as much media coverage as possible. Think of what this does to Christianity and the true message of Jesus, and ask what he would do.

He'd rebuke them. And so should we.

When some church leader organizes an anti-gay march with banners that say "God hates faggots!" we should rebuke them.

When some televangelist boldly declares that anyone who doesn't agree with their exact interpretation of scripture is going straight to Hell, we should rebuke them.

Whenever someone makes Christianity sound like a religion based on hatred and fear, we should rebuke them.

We need to be more vocal in saying, "No! That's not what Jesus would want." We need to be more active in pointing out the 95% where we agree, and rebuking those who would desire to destroy others based on a simple 5% difference. We need to teach ourselves and others to accept and deal with the wonderful complexity and ambiguity that God designed into this universe and seems to be perfectly comfortable with.

And yet, we need to remember that even those who need to be rebuked are probably in agreement with us 95% of the time. As such, we need to be careful that our rebuking of them isn't the equivalent of asking for fire from Heaven to rain down on them. OK, well maybe just a little drizzle - as a warning.

We need to remember those three little words whenever we get a little too sure that we know exactly what God wants, and that those who don't see it our way are simply being obstinate.

John and the disciples needed to be rebuked for their smug certainty that they were totally right and others were totally wrong - to the point of wanting to destroy others. We need it now, and will continue to need it.

This is most certainly true.