

Love Big

Luke 9:51–62

I invite us into this text with the question to Jesus from James and John concerning the Samaritans: “Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?” By this point in Luke’s narrative, Jesus has been linked to Elijah, and that Old Testament prophet did call down heavenly fire to destroy the priests of Baal.

But though he is a prophet, Jesus is not Elijah. He made this clear in his sermon to “love your enemies” (Luke 6:27). Two weeks ago, at the worship and music conference in Montreat, songwriter David LaMotte sang these lyrics about Jesus refusing violence: “Put down your sword... that’s not why I came, not to destroy; the world is already so broken.”

In our reading, Luke does not give us the exact quotation, yet Jesus “rebukes” James and John (Luke 9:55). This is a powerful verb: Jesus also rebukes demons and unclean spirits. Jesus rebukes any spirit of violence and vengeance. His rebuke is part of the demanding challenge of following him.

I can’t help but think of the conflict in the Middle East. For decades, leaders of Iran, along with their militias, have stated their policy to destroy Israel. Obviously, such destruction is anathema to Christ’s teachings. And it should be just as obvious that the killing of civilians, whether in Tehran or Gaza, is also sinful. No matter how Iranians feel about their oppressive regime or how Israelis feel about their hawkish government, everyone on the ground is endangered by warfare. Hospitals and villages are bombed, and children and infants are slaughtered. Jesus rebuked James and John for desiring to destroy their enemies. Jesus came not to destroy; the world is already so broken.

I was also moved by lines from a Cambodian refugee to the U.S. written shortly after the recent 12 Days War.

War makes orphans of us all.
War makes refugees of us all.
War makes us small.

Jesus also says, “Follow me.” He chastises, corrects, and calls. Following him is about waging peace and making justice. Following him is about stepping beyond our small individual selves into the beloved community. And so, Christ’s calling is not merely spiritual or private. Following Jesus means self-sacrificial love. Agape is translated as “charity” in the King James, but I think of agape as big love—love that calls us out of ourselves into the world. Not everyone suffers in a war zone, but following Jesus must push us beyond our comfort zones into a wider community.

Shifting from current world affairs to closer to home, we will welcome Jill Duffield to preach and present in September. She is the former editor of the Presbyterian Outlook and current senior pastor of First Presbyterian Church in Greensboro. But I want to tell you about one of her children.

Marissa Duffield recently published an open letter in the Outlook titled “A Letter to the Church I Love: Comfort or Covenant?”¹ Marissa laments, “Rather than seeing a community bound by the Holy Spirit to love one another and the world, I see people who shroud themselves in comfort and avoid Jesus’s call to stand with the marginalized. I see beloved members of my (church) family choosing not to love me.” Marissa is queer and non-binary, using pronouns they/them. They wrote, “My very identity has been made political, my personhood a political talking point... I need you to be political, to do what’s right even when it is hard or divisive or unpopular.” Anti-LGBTQ legislation is a matter of survival for Marissa. They need us to speak and act so that their personhood is not destroyed. They are calling us to big, brave, agape love.

When Jesus calls us to follow, it’s clear from our reading that his calling rebukes our comfort. I realize that the cultural wars make many of us uncomfortable, but we are not excused to sit on the sidelines. Christ can comfort the afflicted; he also afflicts the comfortable.

As Jesus turned his face toward Jerusalem and his death, he called us to follow him, and as demanding as he is, he also gave us a hopeful metaphor—the plow (Luke 9:62). He often used agricultural metaphors like seeds and harvest. When he

¹ I encourage you to read the entire letter here: [A letter to the church I love: Comfort or covenant? - The Presbyterian Outlook](#)

tells us to “put a hand to the plow,” he evokes an image of preparing the soil for seed, which is a first step. As Paul wrote in his letter to the Corinthians, some people plant seeds and others water them, but only God can provide growth (1 Cor 3:6). Spiritual growth and maturity of faith push us to big brave love: to care for others, to protect the vulnerable, and even to love our enemies.

I’ll be honest: I think loving an enemy—someone who wants to destroy you—is impossible. Then, I remember the angel’s promise to Mary that nothing is impossible for God (Luke 1:37).

Jesus calls us to follow, and through rebuking our errors and empowering our faith, he does the impossible of creating the beloved community. This work is in God’s hands. We put our hand to the plow, and with every step and breath, we choose to either turn back or walk toward love.

I understand that we live in an imperiled time: war, climate change, nuclear weapons, famine, water shortages, authoritarianism and religious fanaticism... But I also understand that many people are sincerely and faithfully trying to follow their faith. Progress is never a straight line. It’s more up and down than the stock market. We all make mistakes, act selfishly, cowardly, and foolishly. I don’t think anyone gets up in the morning, puts their feet on the floor, and says, “Today I will be a hero.” But I do believe that many people wake up and try to do the next right thing, and that enough of us together can make a difference.

Remember that line from the Cambodian refugee? “War makes us small.” A trusted mentor of mine asks themselves before a decision, “Does this make my life bigger?” The choice to meet the moment often means to face grief and suffering, rather than retreat into comfort. But to be like Jesus and “set your face toward Jerusalem” is what grows hope—true hope that is not mere optimism but a bigger, fuller life in Christ and community.

James and John were rebuked for wanting a fire of heaven to destroy, but may the fire of the Holy Spirit ignite faith. Put your hand to the plow and choose to love big.

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