

Calling Down Fire

Luke 9:51-55

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We have a reputation — you know that, right? By we, I mean us Baptists.

Forget the “holy roller” stereotypes. Forget the “evangelistic crusade” stereotypes. Forget the fried chicken and potluck meals stereotypes. If, as Baptists, there is one thing we are known for above all else it is our reputation for splitting.

While still in seminarian in Richmond, I served as an intern at Second Baptist Church — which split from First Baptist Church in the early 1800s over what issue? You will never guess. They split over Sunday School. The young adults at First Baptist Church wanted a Sunday School class and the older generation thought it was heresy to teach on the sabbath. So the young adults left and started Second Baptist Church and it had a Sunday School.

When I left Richmond, they were up to Sixth Baptist Church — and the rumor around town was that Sixth Baptist was in some turmoil and Seventh Baptist was only one bad business meeting away.

That’s our reputation — a denomination known for in-fighting, for division, for splitting.

If you don’t believe me, consider this: comedian Emo Phillips once wrote a joke that has since been voted the best religious joke ever told. It goes like this:

I once saw this guy on a bridge about to jump. I said, “Don’t do it!”

He said, “Nobody loves me.” I said, “God loves you. Do you believe in God?”

He said, “Yes.” 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 denomination?”

He said, “Baptist.” I said, “Me too! Northern Baptist or Southern Baptist?”

He said, “Northern Baptist.” I said, “Me too! Northern Conservative Baptist or Northern Liberal Baptist?”

He said, “Northern Conservative Baptist.” I said, “Me too! Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region or Northern Conservative Baptist Eastern Region?”

He said, “Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region.” I said, “Me too!”

“Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region Council of 1879 or Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region Council of 1912?”

He said, “Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region Council of 1912?”

I said, “Die heretic!” And I pushed him over.

Sometimes the truth is so painful that if we couldn’t wrap at it in a joke and laugh at it, it might just kill us.

Why is it that we’re known for being so divisive, so exclusionary, so judgmental?

I look around this room, and do you know what I think? I see your faces, and I think: “These people are the salt of the earth. They are the light of the world. There is no group of people I want to be around more, want to serve as pastor more than you.”

I don’t know if that’s what you see when you look around this room. But I do. Granted, I get to stand in a privileged position – an admittedly biased position, because I get invited into the parts of your lives that others rarely see. You might share your hobbies and your interests and your take on the Broncos or the Rockies with anyone in this room, but I often get invited into both the great joys and the deep pains of your lives.

I get to hear about how your heart is breaking for your son or your daughter, because their marriage is falling apart and there’s nothing you can do. I get to hear about the toll being a caregiver has taken on your mental and spiritual health. I am often one of the first to hear about the child or grandchild that you will be entering the world and expanding your family circle.

I also get asked the most pressing questions and receive the most candid confessions when you are on your deathbed. You share with me your life-altering diagnoses; your significant anniversaries; your sobrieties... and your relapses. You share with me the challenges that sometimes comes with loving who you love and the pain that can sometimes come with being who you are.

So I have been granted a privileged place in many of your lives. Which means that I often get a front row seat to the very moments that have made you who you are.

We come to church each Sunday wearing our Sunday best, which makes it so that sometimes when we look across the aisle we forget that there is *real* human sitting across from us. That is a real life that has faced real hardship and has to deal with real emotions and real wounds that are sitting just below the surface.

Why are we so quick to want to push the heretic over, when deep down we know that we are no more deserving of God’s love than anyone else?

Jesus nicknamed the brothers, James and John, “the sons of thunder.” My nickname in high school was “shoe,” because of the first syllable of my last name... and because I had an unhealthy obsession with athletic shoes. Sons of thunder would have gotten me a bit more respect.

They definitely earned the reputation as “sons of thunder.” One time, they approached Jesus and said, “Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.” Jesus said, “What do you want?”

They said, “When you come into your glory, we want the places of honor. We want to sit on your right and on your left” (Mark 10:35-37).

Can you imagine? The sheer audacity of it!

“Jesus, before anyone else can, we call dibs on the places of honor.” Of course the other ten were livid with them (Mark 10:41). Only a couple of guys nicknamed the sons of thunder would have the gall to call shotgun on the places of honor next to Jesus in glory.

And then there’s our passage today. Jesus had “set his face to go to Jerusalem” (Luke 9:51). His initial intent, it seems, was to take a shortcut to Jerusalem through Samaria. So he sent a couple of disciples ahead to a Samaritan village to “make ready for him.” But the Samaritan village rejected them and flat-out refused to receive Jesus or his disciples (9:52-53).

It’s hard to overstate how much contempt existed between the Jews and the Samaritans.

Some of it was religious in nature. The Jews believed that Jerusalem sat at the center of God’s salvation history, but Samaritans rejected that belief. Instead, they pointed to Mt. Gerizim as the center of religious life. *We* aren’t that different. The Vatican is to Roman Catholics what Jerusalem is to the Jewish faith. And Salt Lake City is to Mormons what Mt. Gerizim was to the Samaritans. The places we consider holy have a way of distinguishing us as heretics or not in the eyes of the other.

Beyond religion, the disdain between the two was also racial. Samaritans were considered “half-breeds” to many Jewish people. They had intermarried and thus contaminated the bloodline. If they were part of the Harry Potter series, they would have been called “Mudbloods.”

Samaritans were so despised by the Jewish people that when they were gathered around the campfire and telling stories, it was customary for the audience to spit when the story-teller said the word “Samaritan,” as if to spit the bad taste out of your mouth.

In fact, Jews thought so lowly of Samaritans that, in the gospel of John, as conflict was rising between Jesus and the Jewish religious leaders, they accused Jesus of being not

only possessed by a demon, but also a Samaritan (John 8:48). In their eyes, to be a Samaritan was tantamount to being demon-possessed.

So, when that village rejected Jesus and refused to receive him, James and John decided to go all “holy war” on them. The sons of thunder said, “Lord, do you want us to... you know... handle this? You want us to call fire to come down from heaven and burn ‘em up?”

How hard-headed can a couple of disciples be? The way of Jesus isn’t about getting the seats of honor, nor is it or will it ever be about vengeance — no matter how much your pride or ego have been bruised.

Stacy Simpson Duke puts it this way: “James and John’s desire for fiery vengeance would be comical (do they really think they’re capable of calling down fire the way Elijah once did?) if it were not so tragically out of step with all that Jesus had been teaching” (“Luke 9:51-62,” *The Truett Pulpit*, June 20, 2016).

And what kinds of things had Jesus been teaching?

In another place at another time, Jesus told the story of a field that bore up both wheat and weeds. The workers of the field came to the owner and they said, “Do you want us to go and pull up the weeds?” (Matthew 13:28). You can almost hear James and John’s question in it: “Do you want us to call fire down and burn them up?” But the owner of the field said, “No. Because you will tear up the wheat, too.”

The point was that only God really knows and understands who is “wheat” and who is “weeds,” and that we’re best off leaving that part up to God.

We aren’t so good at being able to tell the difference between the wheat and the weeds... but that hasn’t stopped us from trying, has it?

And that’s how the sons of thunder messed up. They mistakenly believed that they could tell the difference between the wheat and the weeds. “Lord, would like us to call down fire from heaven and consume those heretical Samaritans?”

Blaise Pascal once said, “Men never do evil so completely and cheerfully as when they do it from religious conviction.”

And that is the lesson that the sons of thunder have to offer us today: if we are not careful, we can do evil things in Jesus’ name.

You don’t have to think too hard about that, do you? We have all witnessed it or been on the receiving end of it at some point in our lives, haven’t we?

At age six, I was told by a Sunday School teacher in my church that my mom was going to hell because she had been divorced.

At age nine, a different Sunday school teacher told me that my older brother and sister were going to hell because they had come from a broken marriage.

At age eleven, I was told by a deacon that my best friend was going to hell because he was a Lutheran.

And at age eighteen, I told my best friend he was going to hell because he was a Lutheran.

You see what happens?

When we have had enough fire called down on our heads, we start to become those who call fire down on others.

But that's not the way of Jesus.

When James and John tried to call fire down on that village, Jesus *rebuked* them. That word, "rebuke" is a potent word in the Greek language. *Epitimaō*. It means to admonish, to forbid, to *silence*. And, in Luke's gospel it is reserved almost exclusively for moments when Jesus was silencing demons and unclean spirits and out of control storms. But here he had to use it on his own disciples — two of his inner circle. He had to rebuke them.

These days I'm not so into calling fire down on others as I once was. You could say that I have been rebuked. That's a story for another day.

But, as I have thought on this passage this week, here is what I have come to suspect: churches rarely split over theological disagreements. They split when they start seeing some as faithful and others as heretical; when they start seeing some as Jew and others as Samaritan.

And once that view takes hold, we cease to be "us," and we start being "us and them." Then it is only a matter of time until we convince ourselves that it's our job to call down fire on their heads.

But that will not be so in this church.

In this church, we are more than what we do or what we did for a living. We are more than how much we make or in what kind of neighborhood we live or what kind of car we drive. We are more than who we cheer for on Sunday afternoons. We are more than who we vote for in November. We are more than our deficient theologies or our inflated opinions. We are more than our illnesses or our age or our gender or our race. We are more than what we have done and we are more than what has been done to us.

In this church we are not sons and daughters of thunder, but sons and daughters of God.

Thank God for James and John, because through their lives we are reminded that the way of Jesus is not division – but the way of love.

And James and John did finally learn that lesson.

The book of Acts tells us that James was the first apostle to be martyred for his faith (Acts 12:2).

And though he was one of the few apostles to not be martyred, one tradition tells that at the end of his life John went to Ephesus, where he became “the spiritual leader of the church and was known especially for the loving quality of his spirit. As John became weak and senile as he aged, he had to be carried by others into the places where the church in Ephesus would meet.

The old man was almost past being able to make himself heard because he was so weak, but those who revered and cared for him would bring him in and lay him down in the center of the church, where he would rise up on his elbow and say, ‘My little children, love one another.’

When asked, ‘Master, why do you always say this?’ John replied, ‘It is the Lord’s command and, if you love, it is enough’” (John Claypool, *The First to Follow*, 137).

What more can we say, but “Amen”?