

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham

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[Luke 9:51-56; I Kings 18:30-40](#)

“What World Would You Choose?”

They could taste it. They could taste vengeance and it tasted good. They had been oppressed and excluded from virtually everything that their country could offer them. The color of their skin had made them outsiders and virtual slaves in the land their ancestors had inhabited for centuries. Apartheid, the legal segregation and subjugation, of blacks and mixed race members of south African Society had crushed their lives but not their spirits. But now it was their time. Apartheid was over. Black South Africans had been given the right to vote and they had elected Nelson Mandela, their iconic leader as the first black president of South Africa. Mandela, having been kept in a tiny cell on Robbings Island for 27 years, was to be their agent of vengeance. It was time for the majority in South Africa to take back what had been taken from them and make the whites pay. They could taste it.

James and John would have appreciated their feelings...because I believe that they too could taste vengeance. I say this because the reaction of James and John, desiring to annihilate these Samaritan villages, was not simply the result of their having denied Jesus a place to stay. On any level that would have been above and beyond the pale. What we have to understand is that the Samaritans were the enemy. They were an ancient enemy who had been a thorn in the side of Jews for hundreds of the years. The Samaritans were a mix of foreigners brought by the Assyrians about 700 years before the birth of Christ and some Jews who were not carried off into exile by those same Assyrians. Jews who remained in the Southern Kingdom saw the Samaritans as imposters and pretend Jews. For the next 700 years then there were constant political and military skirmishes between Jews and Samaritans. The hatred between the two groups was thus intense and ancient. So what these Samaritans rejected Jesus it seemed appropriate to exact some vengeance and retribution.

Chances are that most of us still find this kind of response a bit disconcerting. Yet before we judge James and John we need to remember two things. First, the scriptures offer precedents for this kind of vengeance. The story we read this morning out of First Kings was also probably not far from the minds of the two disciples. In this story Elijah is fighting for the survival of the religion of Israel; of the worship of the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. The only way to preserve this worship was engage the prophets of Baal in a contest of my God can beat up your god. Needless to say Elijah wins and the prophets of Baal pay the price by losing their lives. The second thing we need to remember is that we live in a Bruce Willis kind of world. I know that many of you were waiting for me to talk about Bruce since he is on the cover of the bulletin this week. So here it is. Bruce Willis epitomizes vengeance as much as any actor of our day. In fact one of his Die Hard movies was die hard with vengeance. And he is not alone. What film makers have discovered is that we Americans love vengeance. We cheer when the bad guys are

destroyed. We love it when the lone ranger hero obliterates his or her enemies. We get to experience vengeance vicariously.

So with all of that in mind we return to the story and see how Jesus reacts. Most of us are probably relieved that Jesus does not approve their plan. We are relieved that he tells them no and then they move on to the next town. But my friends there is far more to Jesus' response than meets the eye. There is more because Jesus not only declares that this is a bad idea...he declares that it is a really, really bad idea. What I mean by that is Jesus does not simply say, get a life, and they move on. Jesus rebukes the disciples. The word rebuke is used only five times in the Gospel of Luke. Twice it is used to rebuke demons who are destroying an individual and are challenging Jesus. Once it is used in reference to a storm...a storm which is about to destroy Jesus and the disciples. The other two times it is used of the disciples. Here and when the disciples keep the children from coming to Jesus. What are we to make of these five occurrences? I would offer that Jesus only rebukes the demonic...meaning Jesus only rebukes those who oppose the coming rule and reign of the loving God of the universe.

When I say demonic I do not simply mean little cartoon demons with wings and big pointy teeth...or for those of you who watch the show Supernatural...beings who spend time inhabiting human beings. The demonic is that which is utterly opposed to the purpose of Christ which is to release, renew and restore God's world. The demonic is that which is focused on demeaning, dominating and destroying the essence of all that is good and right in God's creation. We see the demonic in racism, sexism and homophobia. We see it in hatred and abuse. Any place where human beings are being demeaned, dominated or destroyed the demonic is at work...which is why vengeance is demonic. For you see vengeance is not about justice. It is not about redeeming. It is about the utter destruction of our opponent as if they have nothing within them to redeem. What is also demonic about it is that vengeance is about taking hold of human beings and changing them, us, into those on whom we want vengeance. We become those who rather than wanting to release, renew and restore become those who want to demean, dominate and destroy. Our focus turns 180 degrees from that which Christ desires and toward that which denies the image of God in others around us.

They could taste the vengeance that was coming. Mandela was in office and now the ANC and their followers could make their former tormentors pay. It was the natural thing to do. Yet Mandela would have none of it. In one of the most amazing and history making decisions ever reached, he convinced both blacks and whites in South Africa that instead of vengeance there ought to be reconciliation. In order to do so the nation created the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, whose task it was, was to initiate healing and not retribution. Those who had been harmed by the previous government or the agents of the ANC, the black resistance movement, were invited to tell their stories of kidnap, torture and rape. Those who had committed such acts were invited to admit their guilt and seek amnesty. Of the nearly seven thousand persons coming before the tribunal almost ten percent were given amnesty and the others, from both sides, were dealt with in a just and fair manner. In the end the commission said that both the government and the ANC had committed atrocities. There would be no vengeance. There would be reconciliation. And today we see the result of that choice...South Africa hosting the World Cup.

You and I have been given a choice as to how we will respond to those who hurt us...and I imagine in many of our lives we have been hurt and hurt deeply. We can choose the Willis way...vengeance. Or we can choose the Mandela way...reconciliation and justice. So which world will we choose? Which does Jesus call upon us to choose? So here is my challenge to you for this week, to ask yourselves this question, "Which world am I choosing to live in? The one James and John desired...or the one Christ is calling us to?"