There are a number of elements in today’s readings that I find confusing—troubling, even.

Paul’s dualism concerning flesh and spirit, for example. Over time that has been used to justify some pretty harsh judgments about our bodies in general and sex specifically. Better put, those judgments have nearly always been not about *our* bodies, but *theirs* and *their* sexual expressions. You can, and many have, defined “they and their” in a variety of ways, the common element being, “not the way we treat our bodies.” Frequently these judgments have been made without understanding or compassion. Paul seems to be forgetting here—Greek philosophy and all—that God created our flesh, as well as our spirit, and declared it good.

So that’s one thing. And that’s without delving into the whole ham-handed business of dualism in general—black and white thinking in a multi-hued world of physical and spiritual reality.

Another, more confusing than troubling element is the juxtaposition of Elijah’s and Jesus’ call to their followers. Elijah tells Elisha, by all means, to go back and prepare a feast for his family one last time. Jesus, on the other hand, adamantly says no to a request for a potential follower merely to tell his family goodbye. Even looking back is not allowed. The point, I think, is that this is not a matter of prophecy, foundational though that is, but of fulfilling God’s will and carrying the good news of liberation to everyone. Besides, Jesus by this time has set his face toward Jerusalem and his impending martyrdom.

Without spending more time or energy on those matters, I think the critical line in today’s scripture comes from Paul: “For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’”

How we have drifted—maybe galloped is more like it—from that ideal. Don’t get me wrong. I don’t think our generation—nor our parents’, nor their parents’—suddenly departed from something we always used to do, i.e., love our neighbors as ourselves. We humans were already in the soup on this issue. That’s why Jesus had to say it in the first place and why Paul repeated it only a few years later.

It’s also why Jesus made up a story about the good Samaritan, to show us what it means to love our neighbor and, more pointedly, to show us who our neighbor is. In Luke’s scheme of things Jesus has not yet told the parable. But today’s reading is a nice setup for it.

Luke is careful to identify the village who wouldn’t welcome Jesus and the disciples as Samaritans. You know—right-to-lifers, abortion providers, gay people, drug-dealers (both the street-corner and corporate varieties), Jews, conservatives, liberals, Russians, Ukrainians, pro-gun lobbyists, titans of industry, gun-control lobbyists . . . you know, *those* people.

People on the margins of society particularly. Those easily looked-down-upon. People who come from somewhere else, people without power, without voice, people whose skin is a different color, those who are deemed inferior by some measure or another. Every age and place has its own store of Samaritans.

In this case the disciples acted in a way that should seem familiar to us. They self-righteously ask a question to which they think they know the answer: “Should we rain fire down on their heads?” feeling confident that their leader would agree, because, after all, these are *Samaritans* we’re talking about. Safe ground here, sure footing.

Jesus tells them to shut up.

It might be a coincidence that in the next chapter of Luke’s gospel is where we find the parable of the Good Samaritan. It’s his response to the seeker of truth who also is an expert in the law. His response to that lawyer’s question, “What do I need to do to go to heaven?” Jesus says, “Well, what is the essence of the law?” and the man answers correctly: “Love the Lord your God with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind, and love your neighbor as yourself.”

You’ve got it! Jesus tells him. But the lawyer can’t leave it alone. “So, who’s my neighbor?” he asks.

Enter the parable. No doubt it was not lost on the disciples who had just been rebuked about the Samaritan village incident.

It’s been a pretty tumultuous couple of weeks, what with hearings about the insurrection, gun legislation, and overturning Roe v Wade.

Whatever anyone’s position on these or other issues, our calling as Christians is to love our neighbor as ourselves. And to expand our definition of “neighbor” to include those with whom we disagree, even vehemently disagree. I can’t speak for you, but I find that the most challenging part, that defining of neighbor that includes some of the Samaritans I mentioned a moment ago. Not in theory—I’ve got that down pat. But in the trenches of specific issues and attitudes and actions, in the crucible of political life I find it extremely difficult.

In fact I feel hypocritical even invoking that summary of the law. Because it feels so good, so right, to strike some posture of superiority, often expressed in smug sarcasm, against those who are opposed to my most firmly-held, emotion-laden opinions and beliefs. I’m not crazy about that tendency in myself, but I think that acknowledging it must precede any chance I have of becoming a more loving person.

Jesus was relentless in his opposition to those who put their fellow humans, at risk, even if their motives were ostensibly religious, even spiritual. He was not an easy-going, anything-goes kind of guy. Yet his compassion and love extended to everyone, including those government functionaries whose job it was to nail him to the cross.

I can’t give up on myself and say, “I just can’t stand these [fill in the blank] persons, and no punishment is too great for them.” We can’t give up on ourselves as capable of loving more and judging less, even as we work for change. We are better than that. We are made in the image of God, the very source of love.

And only God who created us can bring us to a place of unity within our diverse opinions and beliefs and backgrounds. God seems to count on us to do our part—to open ourselves to that loving presence and force, as we pray in today’s collect: “Grant us so to be joined together in unity of spirit by their teaching, that we may be made a holy temple acceptable to you.”

+ + +