

Sometimes, it seems to me that James and John the Sons of Zebedee must have been Irish. They were always spoiling for a fight. According to the Bible, they were nicknamed “The Sons of Thunder” (see Mk.3:17). Some people believe that nickname came from their style of preaching which was so energetic and even explosive. But I think it was simply due to the fact that James and John were constantly looking for one more good scrap. James and John were the ones who wanted to sit at Jesus’s left hand and right when The Lord finally came into his heavenly glory, and they were more than willing to fight about that with their ten friends (see Mt.20:20-24). And this morning we see the way James and John react to the Samaritan community’s refusal to welcome The Lord in their midst. James and John were ready to treat this Samaritan town like Sodom and Gomorra, and call down a heavenly rain of fire to consume these stubborn Samaritans (see Lk.9:54). Yes, James and John were all too ready to condemn these northerners to destruction because of this town’s stubbornness, completely unaware, it seems, of their own stubborn streak. How often I feel like a son of Zebedee, incensed and resentful at the mean-spirited behavior of other people, completely blind to that same selfishness which I so cling to.



The Destruction of Sodom and Gomorra by John Martin (1853)

And we read that in response to this resentful, divisive attitude of James and John, the Lord rebukes his disciples (see Lk.9:55). I did a little study on the Greek word which is used here, the word ἐπιτιμάω (pronounced “Epeeteemahoh”) which translates into English as “rebuke.” The way it is most commonly used in the New Testament, this word seems to have the meaning of “to warn.” The first time we encounter it is in Mark Chapter 8, when Jesus rebukes the winds and the waves on the Sea of Galilee (Mk.8:26). He is warning the wind and the waves that these forces of nature need to leave his boat and his friends alone. Jesus is warning the forces of nature to let go of his twelve friends there on that stormy sea, because He – Jesus – is the Lord of wind and wave too.

Next, in Matthew 16, this word is used when, after Peter’s confession of Jesus as the Messiah, Jesus warns His disciples not to tell anyone who He really is yet (see Mt.16:20). In effect, Jesus tells his 12 friends to let go of that burning determination to tell everyone that The Messiah has come, because Jesus knows His time to be glorified hasn’t arrived yet. So he warns His friends to let go of their desire to broadcast to the world who He really is.

Jesus did the same thing with many of the demons he encountered. We read that He rebuked them and warned them not to tell anyone that He was the Messiah (see Lk.4:41), because it was not for demons to announce this to the world. It would be by His Cross that Our Lord would prove His Lordship. So Jesus warned even the demons to let go of this desire to spread abroad just exactly who it was that was healing the people of their demonic possession.

We see this word “to rebuke” or “to warn” used again in Matthew 19, Mark 10, and Luke 18 when the disciples rebuke people for sending their children to Jesus (see Mt.19:13, Mk.10:13, and Lk.18:15). And Jesus rebukes the disciples right back, because it is exactly to these little children that the Kingdom of God belongs (see Mt.19:14; Mk.10:14; Lk.18:16). So Jesus warns his 12 friends that they’d better let go of this kind of bias toward the least of his flock, if the Disciples are to inherit their places in God’s heavenly kingdom.

And finally, there is the thief hanging on his cross who rebukes his crucified companion who has ridiculed The Lord on Golgotha. The justified thief warns his condemned friend to let go of his anger and bitterness if he would truly know the fear of God (see Lk.23:40).

There's always some letting go involved in these moments of rebuke, isn't there? It seems that a loving rebuke from the hand of God is always a reminder that we need to let go of something – a habit, a relationship, a dependence, some bitter anger. God's moments of rebuke seem to be an invitation for us to let go of something if we would truly be His children.

There are actually several gentle rebukes which take place in this morning's Gospel reading from Luke Chapter 9. Each of the three men we encounter brings to Jesus a reason for delaying their journey with The Lord. And Jesus gently rebukes each one of these three individuals. First, Jesus warns the enthusiastic man – the man who says he will follow Jesus anywhere – Jesus warns this man about the real cost of Christian discipleship, how it often means cutting your ties to the security and comforts of this world (see Lk.9:58). The second man wants to go home and take care of his elderly parent who is close to death. But Jesus warns this second man that you can't put the needs of your earthly father over faithfulness to your Father in Heaven (see Lk.9:60). And the third man wants to make sure he explains to his friends at home what he's getting ready to do and where he is going, but Jesus tells this third man that he needs to already have put aside earthly things and earthly relationships if he is to walk the pathway that leads to heaven (see Lk.9:62). In each of these gentle rebukes the Lord reminds these would-be disciples that there is some letting go that still needs to take place.

Each of these three men is faced with a choice. Each of them seeks be blessed as Disciples of The Lord. But each one has to let go of something. To truly receive the blessings of Christian citizenry, it would seem that we have to go to Our Lord with empty hands. We must free ourselves from the things of this world that clutter our lives if we are truly to reach up and grasp the things of heaven.

This is, in effect, the same dilemma that faced Elijah's successor, Elisha. Elisha would have a double portion of Elijah's blessing. But is the younger man willing to let go of Elijah's leadership and example? Is he willing to walk no longer in the wake of his teacher, but instead is Elisha willing to let go of his leader's hand and to accept for himself the mantle and responsibility of leadership with all its challenges and loneliness? In short, in order to be a Prophet, is Elisha willing to let go and let God?

And here's the truly wondrous thing about this process of letting go and letting God. When that moment of submission takes place; when you finally come to relinquish the control of your destiny and hand your fate over to the one being in the universes whose hands are actually big enough to hold it; when you truly make The Lord **your** Lord, then you come face-to-face with that peace of God that really does pass all understanding. Because when we end up submitting ourselves in faith to the all-loving grace of Jesus Christ, He makes us lie down in green pastures. Even if you might be convinced that there's still one more thing on your to-do list to get through, one more fire that absolutely has to be put out, when you make The Lord God the captain of your voyage through this life, you can feel all those burdens you thought were so important just slipping away. And you find that He truly does bring you to a place of still waters where your soul is wonderfully restored – and you come to that quiet-flowing river of peace where you really do lay it all down.

So what about you? Are you ready to let it go and lay your burden down? Are you prepared to reach out with empty hands and receive those mighty blessings of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control? (see Gal.5:22-23) Or is there still some letting go that needs to be done, some laying down of the idols of this world that still has to happen? Is there still a door you need to close, so that you can really open your heart? Are you ready to lay it down, let go, and let God? Because, dear ones, that is my prayer for all of you this day.

In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Amen.

JWB+ 4/18/16



Jesus Calms the Storm by Rembrandt