

God was disturbed. He sensed that things were not going well on Earth, so He dispatched an Angel to go down to Earth to see how people were behaving. The Angel reported back to God that indeed things were not going well. "In fact," reported the Angel, "95% of the people are behaving badly; only 5% are doing what you have taught them to do in the Bible." God was greatly distressed and sent a second Angel to Earth to verify the report. (This part of the story I don't understand because I don't think an angel can lie!) The second Angel returned confirming the first report that 95% were doing badly; only 5% were being good." God thought for a while, and decided, in the spirit of modern communications, to send an e-mail to the 5% good ones, blessing them for their efforts and offering advice.

DO YOU KNOW WHAT ADVICE WAS IN THE E-MAIL? ANYONE? NO ONE IN THIS CHURCH? REALLY? NO ONE? I didn't get one either. I think we're doomed.....Actually I don't think that, and it leads me into today's gospel.

Today we begin a long section of Luke where Jesus focuses on making it clear what discipleship is all about. And so we have that compelling opening line: "When the days drew near for Him to be taken up, He set His face to go to Jerusalem." The life of Jesus was not a series of unforeseen events. There was an overarching plan, a divine strategy. The goal of Jesus' life was to be 'taken up.' But ascension could only be reached by walking the road that led to death and resurrection, the road to Jerusalem. And Jesus 'set His face' – He was determined to give over His life in love for us.

On the way to Jerusalem, James and John are sent ahead of Jesus. When they see that a Samaritan village will not welcome Jesus, they want to destroy the town. James and John were appropriately nicknamed 'the sons of thunder.' (Mk 3:17) They react to rejection with rejection. They respond in kind, only with a lot more muscle. Mere refusal of welcome is met with a scorched-earth policy. James and John are willing to call down fire from heaven, to try to recruit God as the destructive agent of their anger.

Of course, this passion for revenge is the exact opposite of the way of Jesus. His disciples must be able to return blessing for curse and love for hatred. So Jesus rebukes them. They are not displaying either love of God or love of neighbor. They are mindlessly escalating simple rejection into catastrophic reprisal. Jesus just says "Let's go to another village...."

The people they meet along the way give further opportunities for instruction on discipleship. A man declares his intent to follow Jesus – he'll go WHEREVER Jesus goes; but, at the moment, Jesus is going to crucifixion in Jerusalem. Has his zeal taken that into account? Jesus' response injects a note of realism into the man's romanticism. Although animals – birds and foxes have a home in this world, the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head in the socially constructed world in which He lives. Jesus' way consists in not belonging to the present order of things. It entails a continual struggle to bring about a new understanding of God and neighbor and to create a society based on this new understanding.

Another is invited to follow and another asks to follow. Jesus tells the first not to go back to his father – but go forward into proclaiming the kingdom; and the second that he does not need his family's blessing in order to follow Jesus. Seeking permission avoids the question of personal decision. A determined hand on the plough is Jesus' concern. (adapted from THE RELENTLESS WIDOW, John Shea, p. 180-182)

All of this is to indicate to us just how difficult following Jesus really is. We have so often folded our faith into our American cultural reality that we are generally more American than we are Catholic, and we know which allegiance has ETERNAL consequences and which one does NOT. We tend to agree with political

parties more than with Jesus. But it's clear that split loyalties will not be acceptable if we are saying we are Jesus' disciples. We have a path to follow – and it is in the footsteps of Jesus – a path that is forever forgiving, always inclusive, concerned about the poor and non-negotiable about justice. The rich we are told will be sent away empty and the poor are to be lifted up.

Second, some practical considerations of this teaching on discipleship, because it has a great deal to do with how we view our world. There's a story told, more legend perhaps than fact about a mayor of a large American city in the late 1960s. It wasn't a good time for his city: it was facing financial bankruptcy, crime rates were spiraling, its public transportation system was no longer safe at night, the river supplying its drinking water was dangerously polluted, the air was rife with racial tension, and there were strikes and street protests almost weekly.

As the story goes, the mayor was flying over the city in a helicopter at rush hour on a Friday afternoon. As the rush-hour bustle and traffic drowned out most everything else, he looked down at what seemed a teeming mess and said to one of his aids: "Wouldn't it be nice if there was a plunger and we could flush this whole mess into the ocean?"

He was being facetious, but I worry that we sometimes subtly think the same thing about our world – the same as James and John thought about that Samaritan town. Too often we and our churches tend to see the world precisely as a mess, as caught up in mindless trivialization, as self-indulgent, as narcissistic, short-sighted, no longer having values that demand self-sacrifice, of worshipping fame, addicted to material goods, and of being anti-church and anti-Christian. Indeed, it is common today in our churches to see the world as our enemy.

And, far from feeling heartbroken about it, we can feel smug and righteous as we gleefully witness its downfall: the world is getting what it deserves! Godlessness is its own punishment! That's what it gets for not listening to us! It seems like there's a bit of the sons of thunder in all of us.

Third, this is the exact opposite of how Jesus approached the world. Here's how the Gospels describe Jesus' reaction towards the world that rejected and crucified Him: "As Jesus drew near to Jerusalem and saw the city, He wept over it saying: 'If you had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes.' Jesus sees what happens when people try to live without God, the mess, the pain, the heartbreak, and far from rejoicing that the world isn't working, His heart aches with empathy: If only you could see what you're doing.

This is reflected in the opening lines of the Second Vatican Council's pastoral constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes*, or Joy and Hope, from the opening lines of the document. "The joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the people of our time, especially of those who are poor or afflicted in any way, are the joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the followers of Christ as well. Nothing that is genuinely human fails to find an echo in our hearts. For ours is a community composed of people, of people who, united in Christ and guided by the Holy Spirit, press onwards towards the kingdom.... That is why Christians cherish a feeling of deep solidarity with the human race and its history." (#1) The Council is consistent with the way of Jesus revealed in the gospels.

Looking at a world that's breaking down because of its self-absorption, Jesus responds with empathy, not glee; with understanding, not judgment; with heartache, not rubbing salt in the wounds; and with tears, not good riddance.

Loving parents and friends understand exactly what Jesus was feeling at the moment when He wept over Jerusalem. What frustrated, heartbroken parent hasn't looked at a son or daughter caught up in wrong choices and self-destructive behavior and wept inside as the words spontaneously formed: If only you could see what you're doing! If only I could do something to spare you the damage you're doing to your life by this blindness! If only you could recognize the things that make for peace! But you can't see, and it breaks my heart!

The same is true among friends. True friends do not rejoice and become gleeful when their friends make bad choices and their lives begin to collapse. Instead there are tears, mingled with anxious empathy, with heartache, with pleading, with prayers. Genuine love is empathic and empathy is never gleeful at someone's downfall.

Being a disciple of Christ is to have a genuine love for the world. The world is not our enemy. It's our wayward child and much loved friend who is breaking our heart. That can be hard to see and accept when in fact the world is often belligerent and arrogant in its attitude towards us. When it is angry with us, when it wrongly judges us, it generally scapegoats us. But that's exactly what suffering children often do to their parents and friends when they make bad choices and suffer the consequences of that. They impute and scapegoat. This can feel very unfair to us, but Jesus' attitude towards those who rejected and crucified Him invites us to an empathy beyond their judgments.

Kathleen Norris suggests that we look at the world, when it opposes us, in the same way as we look at any angry 17-year-old girl dealing with her parents. At that moment of anger, her parents become a symbolic lightning rod (a safe place) for her to vent her anger and to scapegoat. But absorbing this is a function of adult loving. Good parents don't respond to the anger of an adolescent by declaring her their enemy, or wishing fire from heaven upon her. They respond like Jesus did, by weeping over her. We have plenty of opportunity to practice this right now with the Supreme Court's overturning Roe v. Wade – and the bitter reaction of so many of our American brothers and sisters.

Moreover a genuine empathy for the world isn't just predicated on mature sympathy. Mature sympathy is itself predicated on better seeing the world for what it is. The 17 year—old adolescent standing belligerent and angry before her parents isn't a bad person; she's just not yet fully grown up.

That's true for our world. It's not a bad place; it's just far from being a finished and mature one. Our discipleship is supposed to assist us in growing up and maturing – and therefore our world in growing up and maturing. Amen. (last 2 sections very freely adapted from Rolheiser, posting of 20 November 2011)