

Let me confess something to you: I just don't get some of today's reading.

I share this with you to remind you that even pastors don't have all the answers when it comes to biblical interpretation. There are things we wrestle with and things we find unclear and this phrase is one of them: "On their way they entered a village of the Samaritans to make ready for [Jesus];⁵³ but they did not receive him, because his face was set toward Jerusalem."ⁱ

Yes, the language itself makes sense, but what does it mean that Jesus' face was set to Jerusalem? It says that this is reason the Samaritans didn't receive him—did he just refuse to stop and engage with them? How did they *know* his face was set toward Jerusalem? There is a *lot* of background information and context that we're just not given here.

But I am reminded, once again, that I don't have to understand every nuance of scripture. Thanks be to God! I don't have to know everything to approach the story:

Part one: Jesus' messengers go ahead to prepare a place in a Samaritan village, but the village does not receive him.

Part two: James and John, two of Jesus' disciples, ask if they should rain down fire from heaven as punishment and destroy the village.

Part three: Jesus says no. Jesus says no, leaving the future open.

As I've said, we don't know exactly how this all went down, the Samaritans not receiving Jesus. We know it has something to do with him being focused on Jerusalem, but it's still a little hazy.

On the other hand, I can think of any number of reasons people in our world today are not able to receive the story of Jesus, or the gift of faith that many of us have found—and most of the time, it's not their fault.

Maybe they grew up in a household that was antagonistic towards faith of any kind and they grew up believing that believing in God is no different than believing in the Tooth Fairy or Santa Clause.

Maybe they were in a community that was just apathetic. No strong feelings about religion in general, but also no knowledge of why it might be valuable, or meaningful, or life changing. Why would a person with this worldview seek out Christ? They've never been told why he matters.

Maybe they *did* grow up in a faith community, but one that was so legalistic and devoid of grace that they could not express who they truly are. No room for doubt or questions or forgiveness. Their faith home named them a sinner and why should they expect any other church to do anything different?

Maybe they've experienced a traumatic life event that made them question where God even is in the midst of all of this—and they concluded that God must not be there at all.

I could go on, but I think you see my point. There are so many possibilities for why someone might not be able to even really *hear* the story of Jesus, let alone receive the full gift of faith that might follow.

And that's why it is not our job to respond like the disciples. This village does not receive Jesus and they immediately want to burn it all down. "Fine!" they say, "We don't want you anyway!" They are ready to shut the door on any future relationship or engagement.

It's tempting to do that. When someone dismisses our faith, or puts it down, or doesn't get why it's important to us, we might be tempted to shut that door. We might be tempted to retaliate or act out or figuratively burn it all down.

But Jesus says, "No." And he doesn't even just say no—he *rebukes* them. I'd love to know the words spoken there, but I imagine it was a reminder that exclusion, that punishment, is not the answer to building future relationships. Jesus says no when we want to close the door on other people, and invites us to keep the future open.

Luke tells us that Jesus has his face set on Jerusalem, on what is coming next. We know what that is, don't we? The culmination of Jesus' life and ministry: his passion, death, and resurrection. Jesus' face is set on accomplishing what he came to do.

Earlier in Luke, Jesus sits in a synagogue and reads from the scroll of the prophet Isaiah and lays out his mission statement: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, ¹⁹to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."ⁱⁱ

That's the mission. *That's* the goal. And *that's* what Jesus has been doing and will continue to do, all the way through to his resurrection.

It's not that Jesus doesn't care about these people or this village. He does. He shows, time and time again, how much he cares for people—but I believe he knows that by pursuing this mission, he keeps the invitation to relationship open, and shows by *example* why his mission matters.

He feeds people, heals people, brings people back into community, restores relationships, lifts up the oppressed, pursues justice, holds those in authority accountable. And it is his *actions* that so often bring people to faith in him.

So even if these Samaritans doesn't receive him now, for a reason that doesn't even sound like it's their fault, by continuing to show God's grace and love through word and deed, the door is open for future relationship, connection, and belief.

I tend to think this is what we're called to do, as well. Evangelism can be a scary word, but sharing our faith isn't always getting in front of people and explaining what you believe and why you believe it. It's also *living out* that faith and putting it into practice. Following Jesus' example and participating in the mission: feeding people, providing for shelter and holistic healthcare, building community, advocating for justice, caring for the least among us.

When Jesus talks about keeping a hand on the plow and not looking back, I don't think he is calling us to ignore people or needs or develop tunnel vision. Rather, I think he is reminding us that when we look forward, that when we keep our focus on what God desires of us, that is when God can do some pretty remarkable things, even with the folks we think may have been left behind.

So we keep moving. Keep engaging. Keep pursuing justice and love and peace for this world that God loves. And trust that God will take care of the rest.

Amen.

ⁱ Luke 9:52b-53.

ⁱⁱ Luke 4:18-19.