

Stanford Memorial Church  
May 27, 2004

**RETRIBUTION OR REDEMPTION**  
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**Psalter: Psalm 16**  
**Gospel: Luke 9.51-62**

The gospel lesson falls into two distinct and contrasting segments. Like two distinct views of the world, they represent diametrically opposing perspectives on what life is all about. One has to do with **retribution** . . . the other with **redemption**.

In the first story Jesus has sent messengers ahead of him to the neighboring region of Samaria. But when he enters the village he does not pause; instead, we are told, he “set his face toward Jerusalem” (Luke 9.53). Not surprisingly, the Samaritans do not receive Jesus very warmly. . . why should they roll out the red carpet since, presumably, they felt slighted? So they ignore him. The disciples, however, become enraged. They perceive the Samaritan’s behavior as disrespectful. They want **retribution**. They encourage Jesus to destroy the village and all its inhabitants. As we hear their reaction we may wonder, What is this, some kind of xenophobia—the old feeling that “the Samaritans are inferior to us Jews . . . they have offended us and we will make them pay for that?” Ironically, from the Roman perspective, the Jews were a hopelessly unpredictable bunch of outcasts, little more than a rabble, constantly stirring up things, in the backwaters of the empire. So perhaps the disciples derived some comfort in identifying a group more outcast than themselves.

Then we learn that the two most outspoken disciples demanding **retribution** are the brothers James and John. Wait a minute . . . aren’t these the same ones who talk their mother into asking Jesus if her sons can sit on his left and right when he sits on his heavenly throne? If nothing else, this family was into the use and abuse of power. This is amply demonstrated when they make the almost ludicrous comment to Jesus, “Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them” (Luke 9.55) It’s like, “Hey we have bigger and better weapons than they do . . . they have insulted us . . . so we need to teach them a lesson.” Maybe they even justified their outcry by reasoning, “Once they experience our might and strength, all the survivors will probably become grateful and want to be followers with us.” And where in the world did this threat of “commanding fire to come down from heaven and consume them” come from? Talk about creative imagination and delusions of grandeur! There is no instance in the recorded ministry of Jesus in which he commanded or performed such a holocaust. Indeed, if they had such a weapon of mass destruction, they might have been better advised to use it against their Roman conquerors who so ruthlessly subjugated them.

Jesus responds to the disciples’ retributive exclamation quickly and directly: “he turned and rebuked them. Then he went on to another village.” (Luke 9.55,56). His focus is not on the village of **retribution** but rather the village of **redemption**. He seeks

followers who by their life and actions “proclaim the kingdom of God” (Luke 9.60b). Enlisting such men and women, as we learn from the gospel lesson, is not easy. One person runs up and enthusiastically exclaims, “I will follow you wherever you go” (Luke 9.57). When Jesus points out it will require commitment and a dependence on God, and that “the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head”(9.58), the man’s ardor instantly dissolves. Jesus calls to another, “Follow me,” and the man responds, “Lord, first let me go and bury my father”(9.59) To this Jesus counters, “Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God”(9.60). One critic facetiously suggested, maybe Jesus knew the man’s father was still alive.

What a contrast between Jesus and the disciples. They are on two different wave lengths. They want retribution, Jesus pursues redemption. They become distracted by a desire to get even, to demonstrate their power and superiority. Jesus focuses on the task at hand--to proclaim the Kingdom of God, to demonstrate God’s love, embodied through our actions, our words, our works, our relationships and our concerns. Jesus speaks directly, without ambiguity. It is this sense of focus and commitment, carrying us beyond ourselves, that the theologian and philosopher Kierkegaard wrote about when he stated, “Purity of heart is to will one thing.”

The gospel of Luke often reads like a novel, and the series of vignettes in this ninth chapter must have made the disciples feel they were experiencing something of an emotional and spiritual roller coaster. The chapter begins with the twelve disciples being sent out “to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal” (9.1-6). Shortly after their return they witness Jesus feeding 5,000 people with no more than five loaves and two fish (9.10-17). Thus when they have drawn apart and Jesus asks who they think he truly is, it is not entirely surprising that Peter would answer “(You are) the Messiah of God” (9.20). But rather than celebrating and sharing this incredible news, around which the Jewish faith is structured, Jesus orders them “Not to tell anyone,” and then proceeds to inform them his death will occur in a very short time. The disciples must have felt like they were on a spiritual and emotional yo-yo, between the heights of elation and depths of despair. Next they experience the transfiguration of Jesus, glistening before them on a mountaintop, and a voice from heaven proclaiming, “This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!” The next day they descend from the mountain and encounter a man whose only son appears to be suffering from epilepsy; but the disciples are helpless—even though a short time earlier they had healed others. Jesus heals the boy and once again informs the disciples that he is about to be betrayed. But the words fall on deaf ears, because they are actively engaged in arguing among themselves about who is going to be greatest in the coming kingdom. The enticement of the glory to come has captured their imagination and desires. At this point Jesus places a child in their midst and redefines greatness by saying, “Whoever welcomes this child in my name welcomes me . . . and, the least among all of you is the greatest.” Still the confusion persists, for when the disciple John discovers someone else who is casting out demons in the name of Jesus, he commands him to cease and desist because “you are not one of us.” But Jesus admonishes them, “Do not stop him; for whoever is not against you is for you.” (9.50). This brings us to the incident of today’s lesson and the contrast of retribution and redemption.

At best, the disciples are confused and overwhelmed, suspended between celebration and despair. Never have they experienced such incredible things . . . as they proclaimed the kingdom of God, people listened, incredible healings took place . . . the saw Jesus feed 5,000 people with but five loaves and two fish . . . most astounding of all, Peter declared Jesus to be the long-awaited Messiah, and he did not deny it. Yet—at the same time—Jesus orders them to tell no one about his being the Messiah . . . more disturbingly, he informs them he is about to be betrayed and killed. They are transfixed, however, by the enticing vision of being in the presence of the Messiah. If indeed they are to be the inhabitants of the new Messianic kingdom, then which of them will have the most prominent position? . . . who is in and who is out of this elect group? . . . they cannot permit someone to just go around healing in the name of Jesus, if he or she has not been approved by the elect? . . . and why not use their power to teach the Samaritans a lesson and let them know who the true people of God are?

In contrast to the disciples' illusions of glory and favoritism, compounded by their confusion and thinly disguised self-interest, Jesus focuses on the task at hand. Knowing his time is short and he stands on the threshold of the shadow of death, he calls for men and women to follow him, to put their hand to the plow, to try and be instruments of God's redemption in the world. To be sure there are many fields to plow. Right now as scores of military men and women, and many more innocent civilians, are being killed in Iraq and elsewhere, our number one priority appears to be that of plowing the field of peace in our global village. It is a daunting task which appears to become more so with each generation; but without it, there will be no world for our children and grandchildren to enjoy. Plowing the field of peace calls upon all our resources, ingenuity and determination. As the great philosopher Spinoza so eloquently stated, "Peace is not an absence of war, it is a virtue, a state of mind, a disposition for benevolence, confidence, justice."

Plowing the field of peace is a never-ending quest, and it entails a host of other fields. One is the field of environmental care, addressing such issues as deforestation, vandalizing our oceans, and global warming. Then there is the tragic field of suffering children, as something like 30,000 die everyday—as we were recently reminded by a graduation speaker—as a result of starvation, disease and war. Another field to plow is that of overpopulation, reminding us that the demands being placed on our world will soon exceed its resources. Closer to home are more immediate field to plow, those of homelessness, inadequate health care, and a disintegrating system of education.

One very important field we are attempting to plow within the Spiritual Care Service of Stanford Hospital is that of religious tolerance and inclusion. For we firmly believe that the destructive extremism which infects every one of the world's great religions could well wreak unparalleled havoc unless it is overcome by people of strong faith, who believe that each has much to teach the other about spirituality and belief, and who have discovered that what we have in common is much more fundamental and significant than the few practices which distinguish us. In this regard, I was delightfully surprised when a new physician came into my office this past Friday afternoon. He informed me that he and his wife are both physicians, trained in Egypt, and inquired

about the resources we have for Muslims. I put him in touch with Doha Hamza and Rahinah Ibrahim, the two coordinators of our Muslim volunteer program. After he left, I felt as if I had received something of a divine gift. For I have been quite concerned that in the coming year Doha will be returning to Egypt, and Rahinah will return to Malaysia, each committed to starting an interfaith volunteer group such as we have at Stanford. Maybe this physician and his wife will become the ones to fill this critical leadership role for the Muslim portion of our interfaith volunteer program—helping us to plow the field of interfaith appreciation and cooperation.

Thus Jesus calls us to plow the fields of redemption. Oftentimes our heart and intentions are in the right place, but there are so many excuses, so many distractions. We major in minors. We have so many calls to return on our cellular phone. Our email beckons, bloated with messages from friends, colleagues, committees, advertisers, politicians and spam—anyone of which may contain a virus or worm. Moreover, there is word processing to finish. Still Jesus calls us to plow that field of redemption that lies before us right now.

In the very next section which follows our gospel lesson, we find out that after Jesus issued the call for men and women to put their hand to the plow, he appoints seventy others, sending them “where he himself intended to go,” saying, “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few” (Luke 10.1,2). So we put our hand to the plow, not so much as a burden but as an opportunity, knowing the harvest of redemption will be plentiful—because we do not plow alone. Amen.