

In rivalry with no one  
Proper 8, Year C  
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This is one of those Sundays when no one in our gospel comes off looking particularly good. The disciples and Jesus are traveling; Jesus has set his face toward Jerusalem, Luke says.

The disciples have been on a roll, and by roll, imagine the cartoonish kind where someone has fallen down the steep side of a hill and careening uncontrollably down head over heels. A few verses before our reading today is their argument about who is the greatest. You know the one. We can't be too hard on them: these guys are getting some glimpse of the truth of how powerful Jesus is, they know they're on the right side of history. When Jesus asked what must be given up to to be a part of God's work in the world, they answered correctly and came to Jesus' side. But no motivation is pure, something else wriggles in the dark corners of our hearts; the disciples argue about who will get the highest honor.

To answer them, Jesus invites a child to his side. The weak, the inconsequential, the ones who can't vote or levy power or pay taxes or smoke — your welcome of them in my name is the measure of your greatness. A lovely sentiment, maybe even lovelier for those of us like Jesus and me who have never spent time actually raising children: I thought about my last week's visit to my 7-month-old niece, who is perfect, and how my sister's eyes have developed shockingly dark circles and an accompanying look of exhausted defeat. "She's a demon," my sister stated forlornly, as her equally exhausted 7-month-old screamed at regular intervals to keep herself from falling asleep. This is the kingdom. Unsettling, for those of with power and control and advanced degrees who pay taxes and smoke — Jesus lifting up this irrational, helpless thing instead of his over-achieving friends, as if to ask, why are you in rivalry with one another?

The little band keeps walking in an embarrassed silence (you can tell because James blushes easily), their ambition recognized and then disparaged. John tries to recover by passing the buck. "Well, we saw a guy back there who wasn't even called by you who was casting our demons in your name and told him to knock it off. Can you believe the audacity, the presumption of that guy? What does he know about our work?"

Jesus stops. "Why did you do that? Don't you know that who ever is not against you is for you? Why are you tearing other people down?" This one with the impure motives, the one trying to get in on the movement who has no place there, the one diluting the message — he's in, too. These people are not your competition. Why are you in rivalry with them?

Which brings us to our Gospel. Jesus sends messengers on ahead; knowing the prequel, maybe it's a nice way of saying he's fed up with their company for now. The disciples entered a village of Samaritans, strangers who aren't even pretending to follow Jesus, strangers who had it clearly wrong and who were actually against them and their beliefs. John and James seize their chance — they rush to Jesus breathlessly and say, "How about we call down fire from heaven to consume them?"

Let's pause in our chapter of the disciples' terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day for a clarifying interlude. Because it is important to understand that John and James are acting biblically here. They are following scripture to a tee.

Who do people think Jesus is? It's also in Luke chapter 9. The disciples say people think Jesus is John the Baptist — but others say Elijah. Why do they think that? We have our answer in our Old Testament reading. Elijah, the greatest prophet next to Moses, never died. He was taken up to heaven in a whirlwind and fire.

And what was Elijah famous for? Calling fire down from heaven on his enemies! Scott told you the story last week of the 850 prophets of Ba'al; we all know the fire came and consumed Elijah's offering and even the water that filled the trenches all around it. But Sunday school and our lectionary edit out the grislier detail that Elijah then slaughtered each of the 850 rivals of his with a sword. He walks away stained and splattered with the blood of nearly a thousand people and crawls into a cave and a deep depression. "Take away my life, Lord," he prays, "for I am no better than my ancestors." His power to stop his rivals has left him empty.

Elijah's faith of violence and fire is deconstructing; his will to live seems to go with it. Maybe you know that feeling. He disappears, only to return at God's behest to tell the king that he will die because of his idolatry. The king sends a troop of 50 men to find Elijah and bring him to the palace, and Elijah calls down fire from heaven to incinerate them when they try to speak to him. The king sends another 50, and this repeats. Finally, one captain comes groveling on his knees and he is spared the fire from heaven. The next time we see Elijah is our reading today, that he really is done with this life. I read it not with a tone of triumph, but of pathos; the man himself consumed in those flames which he once commanded. Maybe you know that feeling, too.

Centuries later, the Jewish people await Elijah's return. John and James and others see that spirit in Jesus but have not yet learned what Jesus has — that those who live by the flames perish by them, that Jesus is in rivalry with no one.

Rivalry was natural in my competitive family. My dad boasted last week when we sat down to Trivial Pursuit, "I've never lost at this game or any other I've ever played." "Second place is the first loser" is the closest thing we have to a family motto.

You and I live in world where competition and enemy are nearly synonymous. We can bring fire down from heaven on any of them with the push of a button. The sacrificial shedding of other people's blood, so the story of humankind goes, is what ensures our freedom. Financial security, they say, is thanks to competition on the free market. We spend our time wondering about the powerful and our proximity to them: who will be at your right hand, Lord? And as our polarization deepens, we hear that voices who do not proclaim with purity the given doctrine are to be rebuked and silenced.

When we seriously read the Bible, we begin to see that our realities are just old systems, cranking out the same rivalries, competitions, winner/loser, insider/outsider narratives century after century. But Luke says Jesus has his face turned away from all these things; his face is turned toward Jerusalem. Will you follow him there? It's a hard road — it upsets the order of things, he tells us friend and family will find your change of mind alarming. But who knows? If you have felt like Elijah, that the things you could trust, that which once held purpose and meaning has gone up in flames, maybe you're closer than you think. It's through the ashes where Jesus found life.