

## Proper 8, Year C

- When I got out of the military, I eventually found work as a civilian contractor, doing exactly the same thing I had done in the military, just with better pay and more freedoms
- I started with one company and then eventually switched to another when I saw the pay that they were offering and initially thought it must have been some sort of mistake
- But it wasn't, and I got that second contracting job with the hefty paycheck and then became one of that company's most enthusiastic recruiters, which I think was probably part of the idea
- I ended up helping to bring in some of the best and brightest translators I knew, including a couple friends I had worked with before
- And along the way, I end up recruiting a relatively new friend at the time, who was new to contracting, and asked me a lot of questions about things like salary negotiations
- Ultimately, and even knowing I probably shouldn't, I told him how much money I made and said that they had been hiring a lot of people for that rate, and that he should use it as at least a ballpark target in negotiations – obviously I shouldn't have done that, but I wanted to help the guy out and thought I could trust him
- Little did I imagine that he would walk into the contract negotiations and say, "I know for a fact that Ian makes this much money and so that's what I want for my salary."
- As you can probably imagine, when I found out, I was livid
- More than a little mad at myself for trusting him, but absolutely furious with him for such a brazen betrayal
- I don't think I've ever been so angry in my life, before or since
- In the days after I found out, my prayer was a bit like that of the disciples in the Gospel today, when the Samaritans did not receive Jesus, though maybe even a little more hopeful, something like, "Lord, please command fire down from heaven and consume him."
- I wasn't simply angry at him, I wanted him punished, maybe even (I'm not proud to admit), wanted to see him destroyed
- In using that as his opening line, he'd taken my attempt to help him, and used my professional credibility for his own personal gain
- But what I didn't realize at the time was this: him not loving me as he did himself didn't mean I was off the hook for loving him – God's love and grace and mercy extended to him, even though I didn't think he deserved them – and thanks be to God for that, because that

means they also extend to me, who deserves them not a shred more

- That's a difficult lesson to learn, and an even more difficult lesson to remember
- The disciples, understandably upset that people were ignoring Jesus, not paying attention to the Messiah, the Son of God, had to learn that lesson again – and Jesus didn't teach it gently – he rebuked the disciples for wishing ill even on those who ignored his message
- Even the Samaritans' disregard for God – God who is not simply the most important thing in the world, but the source of what importance even means – even that wasn't enough to warrant the disciples wishing for their destruction
- There can be little doubt that the urge to see our enemies destroyed is both an understandable human impulse and a profoundly unChristian sentiment
- The story doesn't stop there, though, and I'm glad for that, even though the next part of the passage is incredibly difficult – because I think it says something we need to hear
- Someone says they want to follow Christ, and is told that Christ has no home to speak of – then asks to bury his father and is basically told by Christ, “to do that is to turn your back on me.”
- Those who would follow Christ, are asked to give up seemingly everything – personal comfort, worldly possessions – even social conventions and familial allegiances
- That's a tough enough demand on its own, but it's worth noting that family was probably strongest allegiance at the time
- If this story were told today, would it be home and family that Jesus asks us to turn our backs on?
- Or would it be something else? Brand loyalty, perhaps? Defining our lives in terms of consumption? Or maybe political affiliation?
- Following Christ, the message seems to be, might just cost us everything – so to truly follow, that's a price we have to be willing to pay
- Our allegiance to Christ is meant to be our first and foremost loyalty – our lives are meant to have God at the center of our world and as the grounds of our identity
- Having anything else before that – whether it's our last name, our own ideals, or even our own self-interest – is against what Christ asks of us
- That's what Paul means about freedom, incidentally
- Self-interest or the urge to be right and triumph over our enemies, even to have God bring down fire from heaven and consume them – isn't freedom – it's slavery to our basest impulses, to the whims and desires that we're just too unwilling to control

- Freedom means freedom even from ourselves, even from the unhealthy desires that eventually turn us into the sort of people we don't actually even want to be but feel like we can't help becoming
- We're told how we ought to live instead: "the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control."
- If that's what our life ought to be like, well, it only takes the tiniest bit of observation and objectivity to realize what really gets in the way of those fruits of the Spirit – what takes us away from a God-centric life
- We could all probably add a few items from our own experience to what Paul called the "works of the flesh"
- Our smartphones, at times, maybe, when they offer a constant distraction that we never want to be distracted from?
- Our lack of will to do what is difficult but necessary to prevent bad things from happening to others and to the world?
- Our urge to be right, and even our sense of righteous indignation against those whom we feel have wronged us in some way? The urge to see our enemies destroyed by the justice of God?
- "If," Paul says, "however, you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another." If we help to perpetuate a dog eat dog world, we are going to get eaten alive.
- That is not what we're intended to be.
- God has such higher hopes for us and for the world.
- Hopes that we'll choose instead the way of love – that we will shrug off our lower drives and baser impulses, will stop desiring our own triumphs or the destruction of our enemies, and instead put on Christ – that we will decide to truly be His Body, for the sake of the world
- For freedom Christ has set us free.