

A sermon preached the Congregational Church of Almaden Valley, United Church of Christ  
San Jose, CA

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Luke 9:51-62 (*The Message*) and Psalm 77:1-2; 11-20

### *Imagine saying "Of Course Not"*

**This passage from the Gospel of Luke always strikes me as funny. I suppose its funny to me because it shows our Christian forebears once again acting like silly immature people. A lot of our stories about exchanges between Jesus and the disciples have our intrepid apostles saying or doing something self-righteous or silly or in anger and Jesus then rebuking them. As my former mentor and professor, Rev. Dudley Rose, is fond of saying "the disciples were slow learners." He also reminds us that it's a good thing we serve and worship a loving God who forgives and loves all of us slow learners.**

**This morning Jesus has sets his sights on traveling to Jerusalem, the center of one sect of within the Jewish faith. Because the Samaritans don't adhere to Jerusalem being the center of their own Abrahamic faith they refuse to show any hospitality to Jesus and his slow learning disciples. You see, the Samaritans felt that they practiced the true faith of the monotheistic Jews as it was practiced before they were sent into exile in Babylon. The other monotheistic Jews who returned from Babylon practiced the faith wrong in the eyes and minds of the Samaritans. And since they would not show Jesus and disciples hospitality what do the disciples? They want to, as we heard in the Bible translation from Eugene Peterson's *The Message*: "call a bolt of lightning down out of the sky and incinerate" these god-forsaken Samaritans. And what does Jesus do? Does he agree with them and use his power to fry these bad dudes? Hey, Jesus has been through this all before way back in the desert after he was baptized and the devil was tempting him to use his power for human and political dominance. Jesus didn't bite that apple then and he's not going to bite that apple now either. Instead he turns to the slow learning disciples and says "Of course not!"**

**We Christians don't have a much better record when it comes handling our religious differences. Just look how many denominations there are in the Christian faith. According to one report there are over 38,000 Christian denominations in the United States alone!**

**<http://christianity.about.com/od/denominations/p/christiantoday.htm> We have religious sects that were spawned by other religious sects—all because we can't agree on who God is, what God is, what God wants us to do, how God wants us to live our lives, and**

on and on and on. We have three major Abrahamic faiths—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—that have major theological disagreements and have literally slaughtered each other down throughout history because of what some believed and some did not believe. “Oy vey” as our Jewish brothers and sisters might say in Yiddish and hold their hands up in exasperation. Oh, and just for good measure our Jewish and Muslim sisters and brothers in monotheism also have many subcategories and sects within their faith, too! Is it any wonder that there are a lot of atheists in the world who think life would be so much simpler and peaceful if we all just forgot this idea of there being a “god?”

There is an old story which some of you many have heard before. It does a good job of crystallizing the way in which people of faith often just don't listen to each other or even if they listen their brains just cannot comprehend what someone is saying about their beliefs. It goes like this:

### *Silent Battle With The Pope*

Several centuries ago, the Pope decreed that all the Jews had to leave Italy. There was, of course, a huge outcry from the Jewish community, so the Pope offered a deal. He would have a religious debate with a leader of the Jewish community. If the Jewish leader won the debate, the Jews would be permitted to stay in Italy. If the Pope won, the Jews would have to leave.

The Jewish community met and picked an aged Rabbi, Moishe, to represent them in the debate. Rabbi Moishe, however, could not speak Latin and the Pope could not speak Yiddish. So it was decided that this would be a "silent" debate.

On the day of the great debate, the Pope and Rabbi Moishe sat opposite each other for a full minute before the Pope raised his hand and showed three fingers.

Rabbi Moishe looked back and raised one finger.

Next, the Pope waved his finger around his head.

Rabbi Moishe pointed to the ground where he sat.

The Pope then brought out a communion wafer and chalice of wine.

Rabbi Moishe pulled out an apple.

With that, the Pope stood up and said, "I concede the debate. This man has bested me. The Jews can stay."

Later, the Cardinals gathered around the Pope, asking him what had happened.

The Pope said, "First I held up three fingers to represent the Trinity. He responded by holding up one finger to remind me that there was still one God common to both our religions. Then I waved my finger around me to show him that God was all around us. He responded by pointing to the ground to show that God was also right here with us. I pulled out the wine and the wafer to show that God absolves us of our sins. He pulled out an apple to remind me of original sin. He had an answer for everything. What could I do?"

Meanwhile, the Jewish community crowded around Rabbi Moishe, asking what happened.

"Well," said Moishe, "first he said to me, 'You Jews have three days to get out of here.'

So I said to him, 'Up yours'. Then he tells me the whole city would be cleared of Jews.

So I said to him, 'Listen here Mr. Pope, the Jews ... we stay right here!'"

"And then?" asked a woman. "Who knows?" said Rabbi Moishe. "We broke for lunch." ([http://www.jokefile.co.uk/numerical\\_order/1166.html](http://www.jokefile.co.uk/numerical_order/1166.html))

This story may have some humor in it, but as we all know the Christian crusades against the Jews and Muslims were bloody wars when the dominant Christian communities committed acts of terrorism against people who simply worshipped the same god they worshipped in a different way. I am absolutely convinced that Jesus would have told these crusaders, just like he told his slow learning disciples "of course not" if he had been asked to go on one of these crusades.

Remember former Beatle John Lennon's famous songs in which he sang:

*Imagine there's no Heaven  
It's easy if you try  
No hell below us  
Above us only sky  
Imagine all the people  
Living for today*

*Imagine there's no countries  
It isn't hard to do  
Nothing to kill or die for  
And no religion too*

*Imagine all the people  
Living life in peace*

**Yes, John was a “dreamer,” as he fully admitted in the same song, *Imagine*. And, of course, his song discounts all the wonderful things religious organizations do and have done for people. Still, after all the bloodshed, and conflict, and angry words, splitting up of churches, and splitting up of friendships, and divisions between people of faith I sometimes wonder what it would be like if we had a little less religious dogma and a whole lot more love and trust in our faith communities and between people of faith and no faith.**

**The great gift of God, though, is that we do have a choice. We can figuratively, or literally, bring down fire and brimstone on people who disagree with us or we can say as Jesus would have said “of course not.” When people call upon us to use emotional, or psychological, or real violence against those who do not see the world in the way in which we see the world we can respond “of course not.” This is harder to do than my words imply, though, my friends. But, we need to keep praying for that strength to live in peace in the midst of differences between our neighbors of a different faith, and between our friends and family members, who don’t always see eye to eye with us when it comes to who God is or is not. Amen.**