

Some 45 years ago (gasp!) as I entered my third year in seminary, I charted a new course of study—or, to be more exact, I adjusted my course of study. Pastoral care had been the focus of my studies up to that point; and perhaps influenced by the prospect I would become the mother of 2 small children in the coming year, as well as due to interests my previous study had opened for me, I chose to add a second track. I decided to add a specialty in the pastoral care of children. Classroom lectures, supplemented by practical experience in the seminary's excellent preschool, proved to be a fascinating combination; and I was happily off and running. I recall in particular one classroom lecture when Dr. Elizabeth Hutcheons, speaking about the Bible and children, told us very seriously that some portions of the Bible should be used with children only sparingly and then with great care. She spoke specifically of stories of violence. Stories such as those about the great flood, Sodom and Gomorrah, David and Goliath, the military exploits of Old Testament heroes, and even the death of Jesus on the cross could, she suggested, be told as suspenseful adventures and meet with enthusiastic reception. Spotlighting the violence in the stories, however, might well leave the children with a message we do not intend, glamorizing violence on the one side and/or instilling fear of a wrathful God on the other.

I thought of Dr. Hutcheons' words this week when I read Pittsburgh Theological Seminary Professor Dale Allison's account of an experience with his own children. Thoughtlessly perhaps, he read them the story of the prophet Elisha's encounter with some rather naughty children. On Elisha's way to Bethel, 2 Kings specifically tells us,

some small boys came out of the city and jeered at him, saying, "Go away, baldhead! Go away, baldhead!" When he turned around and saw them, he cursed them in the name of the Lord. Then two she-bears came out of the woods and mauled forty-two of the boys. From there he went on to Mount Carmel, and then returned to Samaria (2:23-25).

The children's response was immediate and unequivocal: "That's not in the Bible!" they assured their dad. Rightly, they were horrified. And researching first century Jewish interpretations of scripture, Allison came to agree. The horror expressed by his children was not unlike that of prominent Jewish voices within the time of Jesus. It may have been Bible, but it was Bible with which faithful interpreters experienced profound dis-ease. The violence in Elisha's encounter with the children and other instances of violence raised significant issues about the very nature of God—issues that could not go unaddressed.

The well-known Jewish historian Josephus, for example, takes on other troublesome passages, but remains, Allison observes with some humor, "discreetly silent" concerning Elisha's encounter with the children. Josephus was, Louis Feldman observes, "embarrassed by this heinous act." Others, however, reached far in trying to come up with an explanation. Perhaps, some suggested, Elisha knew that the children had actually been conceived on the Day of Atonement—a huge "no-no". Or perhaps Elisha knew on looking at them that the commandments were not in them and would not be honored by their descendants. Or perhaps the children, another interpreter suggested, were not really children. Perhaps they merely acted like children, being little in faith, not in age [Allison, "Rejecting Violent Judgment," *Journal of Biblical Literature*].

Having grown up in a culture in which questions were not to be raised, particularly when it came to the Bible, I find some comfort that this wrestling with scripture is nothing new to faith, but an integral part of it. Perhaps more significant for our passage today are the questions raised about the instance to which Luke seems to be alluding when he depicts the Sons of Thunder ready to call down fire from heaven on the inhospitable Samaritans. Elijah, mentioned by Luke three times in the immediately preceding verses, called down fire to consume soldiers sent by the evil Samaritan king (2 Kings 1). Was violence, as in *fire*, not also appropriate for this situation? Did God indeed despise those who rejected God's purposes and stand ready to aid in their destruction?

In one community of Judaism the answer would have been "yes". The writings of the remote Qumran community where the Dead Sea Scrolls originated do speak of a God who hated the "sons of darkness" and anticipated their destruction. The Judaism with which Jesus was acquainted, however, would have been versed in the teachings of Exodus 34, Ezekiel, and Psalm 145 concerning a God who was "merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love." This God, interpreters taught, leaned over backwards to delay the death of sinners in order to give them time to turn and live. The first or second century writing known as *The Testament of Abraham*, for example, tells of the righteous Abraham being borne in a chariot to heaven. Able from that vantage point to view the whole world, Abraham sees thieves, murderers, and adulterers and one-by-one calls upon beasts, fire from heaven, and the earth to swallow them. Finally, I would even say with some humor, an exasperated voice comes from heaven: "Turn Abraham back, lest he

see all the inhabited world . . . [and] destroy all the creation.” Abraham, God explains, “has not sinned, and he does not have mercy upon sinners. But I made the world, and I do not wish to destroy any of them” [*Testament* 10:4-14]. In a similar manner, a rabbi notes that when the Egyptians were being drowned in the Red Sea, God ordered the angels not to sing: “The work of my hands is being drowned in the sea, and will you chant hymns?” [Allison, 469]

In keeping with some of his contemporaries, then, Jesus cites the nature of God as the underpinning for his prohibition of violence—even violence undertaken in the name of righteousness. His answer to the disciples’ readiness to rain the wrath of God upon the Samaritans is an unqualified “No!” He makes no effort to soften his words with the explanation that although fire from heaven was fine in Elijah’s situation, it is not appropriate in the present. Neither does he reassure the disciples that it’s merely a matter of timing—that they are merely asking the right thing at the wrong time. His answer is an unequivocal “No!”

Luke does not depict Jesus taking time to reiterate to the disciples instruction he has so recently given them. He does not remind them of his counsel that those who follow him must do good to those who hate them, bless those who curse them, pray for those who abuse them, and love, not hate, their enemies (Lk 6:27-28, 35). He does not reiterate his commands of love and non-retaliation, all grounded in the nature of the God who “is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. Be merciful,” Jesus has told them, “just as your Father is merciful” (6:35, 36). Remembering who God is and remembering God’s gracious action toward you, “Do not judge. . . . Do not condemn. . . . [and] Forgive,” (6:37). The God of grace births people of grace, not wrathful, vengeful, self-righteous crusaders; and that, Jesus is saying, is how you will recognize them as God’s children.

Just over a week ago, Fred Phelps, former leader of Westboro Independent Baptist Church, Topeka, Kansas, died. His son, Nathan Phelps, posted a statement on the Recovering From Religion website. “Fred Phelps” the statement began, “is now the past. The present and the future are for the living.” Despite the fact that some of his father’s ideas will unfortunately live on, the statement continued:

I will mourn his passing, not for the man he was, but for the man he could have been. I deeply mourn the grief and pain felt by my family members denied their right to visit him in his final days. They deserved the right to finally have closure to decades of rejection. . . . Even more, I mourn the ongoing injustices against the LGBT community, the unfortunate target of his 23 year campaign of hate.

Under the banner “God hates fags. God hates fag-enablers . . . God hates America,” Fred Phelps and his small band of extended family, picketed funerals of gays, AIDS victims, fallen soldiers, and even the funerals of some children murdered or killed in car accidents. Most famously, he picketed the 1998 funeral of Matthew Shepard, a gay student brutally murdered in Laramie, Wyoming, and sought to erect a monument to the day Shepard “entered hell”. “Military funerals are pagan orgies,” he explained in 2006, “of idolatrous blasphemy where they pray to the dunghill gods of Sodom and play taps to a fallen fool.”

“Shall we call fire from heaven?” the disciples asked Jesus. “Yes,” Phelps’ hate-filled religion responded. “No,” responded Jesus. “Go and live out the grace you yourselves have encountered in the God of love and compassion. Go extending welcome and taking down walls of enmity and division. Go building beloved community in my name. *Then* you will be known as the very children of God.”

And so we go.