

## **Competing Delusions of Peace – Luke 12:49-56 – August 14, 2016**

**Rev. Rachel A. Wann**

If you were paying close attention to the scripture lesson this morning, you might have felt a twinge or two of discomfort. It's one of those difficult passages that we come across in scripture from time to time. A passage that seems to defy interpretation. One you just want to pass over or bury out in the back yard under a bush.

So here in the twelfth chapter of Luke, Jesus is speaking to his disciples when he opens with, "I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled...Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division!" And then he gives examples of a divided family.

Now, wait a second. Isn't this the Prince of Peace? Isn't Jesus the one about whom the angels proclaimed at his birth to the shepherds tending their flocks by night that he would bring peace and goodwill to all? Hasn't his ministry been full of episodes of healing and restoration and reconciliation?

So why do we have this scene where it appears as if Jesus has become possessed by some fire and brimstone version of the God of wrath? Here we have an angry Jesus, and frankly we don't like it. Why? Because anger is messy. It causes conflict. It interferes with the status quo.

On his blog a pastor named Bob Cornwall shared an experience where he had attended a training workshop for faith-based community organizing. When the group met, the leader of the training kept asking the group, "What makes you angry?" The premise of the presentation was that the participants must get in touch with their own anger in order to be effective in their ability to change the world for the better. The group leader wanted to know what made them mad, what drew their ire. The members of the group were troubled about the leader's repeated requests for them to examine their anger. After all, many in the group were Christian clergy, who were not supposed to ever get angry.

But here was the leader's point. Concern about social injustice wasn't enough. In order to take action, to make a real difference for social change, one needed to have passion. It takes a little righteous anger to stir one to action. Without that zeal, they were likely to do little more than sit back, shaking their heads in dismay over the social problems they saw around them, but doing little to actually change anything. (from Bob Cornwall's blog "Ponderings on a Faith Journey")

Don't mess with the status quo. Don't get involved. Don't cause any trouble. Look the other way. Keep. The. Peace. But what kind of peace is that?

Another pastor named Todd Weir shared an experience he had. While taking a few months off for a sabbatical, he took a class in mediation training. From it, he learned a lot about himself. He learned

that he was the type of person, like many of us, who preferred to avoid conflict. In his church and in his home life, he spent much of his energy trying to keep everyone happy. Keep the peace at all costs. Sound familiar to anyone? Todd discovered he had a pattern of trying to diffuse conflict through diversion. Anytime a negative situation threatened to cause any type of disruption, he would redirect the conflict by pointing out and focusing on all the positives. Conflicts were never resolved, the status quo was maintained, and the illusion of peace continued.

After this pastor returned to his congregation following his sabbatical he put his new learning into practice. When a situation arose that threatened to stir up conflict, instead of avoiding it, he exposed the conflict and sought resolution among the parties. No more keeping the peace at all costs. Instead he encouraged people to do the hard work of resolving their differences. Well as you can imagine, this actually stirred up more conflict. After a few weeks, one of the lay leaders in the church came up to him and said, "You know, I liked it better when you fixed everything for us." (from Todd Weir's website, *Blooming Cactus*, "Not Peace but a Sword")

So let's look back at the passage from Luke. As the passage opens, Jesus has been talking first to his disciples when he makes the assertion that he came into the world bringing fire and division. But now he expands his audience to include the crowds who have come to hear him. These people are following along, gathering around him wherever he goes, trying to figure him out. They listen to him but most of the time they don't get what he's saying.

He says to them, "Look, you people are smart enough to anticipate changes in the weather. You don't have the Weather Channel app on your smart phone, but you can look out to the west and see the clouds forming, and you know a storm is on its way. Or the winds change, and you feel the breezes coming in now from the southern desert, and you know that scorching heat will follow. You're a bunch of hypocrites! You can figure out the weather patterns by being observant, but you are completely oblivious to the signs all around you, and you fail to interpret the present time."

What is Jesus talking about? The Jewish people living with the status quo. They're getting by living under the oppressive rule of Rome – they have learned to worship and to function under this foreign government. There seemed to be peace on the surface of this arrangement, but any glimmer of conflict was quickly covered up. But now Jesus has come into the world, bringing with him God's agenda - an agenda that will shatter the status quo. His teachings and actions of justice and compassion have not failed to attract the attention of those in power. And those in power don't like it when the status quo is disrupted.

Jesus knows what is looming before him. He knows that those in power can be pushed only so far before action is taken against him.

When Jesus talks about him bringing division into the world, he is not saying that he came to simply divide people – to cause division simply for the sake of division. It's not like when a group of people

intentionally divide into two teams in order to play a game. The type of division that Jesus is talking about is the division that will naturally occur as a result of God's mission in the world. He is describing the reality of what will occur when people choose or choose not to follow him. The division will be a result of the disruptive power of the gospel. The message that Jesus brings is that God reaches out in love to all people, including those who try to hinder the voice of Jesus and message of the gospel. Even to those who would crucify him.

So when we hear the words of Jesus in this passage and we hear his anger and his passion, as he speaks to both his disciples and the crowds, we hear a man who knows that the message he brings is one that will stir up a great deal of conflict and will cause division, even among families. As he got more popular with the crowds, he became less popular with the religious leaders. As he reinterpreted the law by healing on the Sabbath and touching those who were unclean, he stirred up conflict. As he redefined Messiah as one who comes into the world to turn the world upside down, not through violence or force, but rather by justice and compassion, he confounded those who wanted to swap one power for another power.

This is the Jesus we see in Luke 12. The one who knows his time is short. The one who knows that those who follow him will be persecuted and some martyred. No wonder he is yelling for those around him to wake up and see the reality of God working among them. This reality is disruptive and the kind of peace they now grasp onto is not the peace of God.

If you would, I invite you to take your bulletin and look at the hymn printed in there "They Cast Their Nets in Galilee." The words of the poem that became the text for this hymn were written by William Alexander Percy. Percy was a poet and a lawyer from Mississippi who served as a captain in and was awarded medals during World War I. When he returned home after the war, he joined with his father, a U.S. Senator, and stood up against injustice that he saw around him. He opposed the rise of the Ku Klux Klan, and his angry neighbors dismissed him as a sissy. It was then that he wrote his poem, "His Peace" that became this hymn. (from the website, *The Associated Parishes for Liturgy and Mission* )

Hymn Text:

Verse 1 They cast their nets in Galilee just off the hills of brown;  
Such happy, simple fisherfolk, before the Lord came down.

Verse 2 Contented, peaceful fishermen, before they ever knew  
The peace of God that filled their hearts brimful, and broke them too.

Verse 3 Young John who trimmed the flapping sail, homeless in Patmos died.  
Peter who hauled the teaming net, head down was crucified.

Verse 4 The peace of God it is no peace, but strife closed in the sod.  
Yet, Christians, pray for but one thing – the marvelous peace of God.

As you read through the hymn you'll see the type of disruption that Jesus caused. His disciples were just average people, getting by in the world, until Jesus came. In verse three, things change. By

following Jesus, they experienced the harsh consequences of their devotion to his mission. And verse four reads, "The peace of God, it is no peace, but strife closed in the sod. Yet Christians pray for but one thing – the marvelous peace of God."

There is a peace that maintains the status quo - that turns away from injustice in order to avoid conflict. And then there is the peace of God. Episcopal Priest Frank Logue shares his experiences of growing up in the south. He was born in Alabama and raised in Georgia. He writes, "I recall a kind of racial peace that was a lesser peace at best. The peace was maintained by blacks who sat in the back of the bus and knew better than to enter white restaurants. The promise of God's peace called people black and white to stand up for their own rights and the rights of others and led them to refuse to settle for any lesser peace."

God's peace demands justice at any cost. It's not a surface peace; it's not the kind of peace that hovers over the Holiday dinner table at Mom's house, when warring siblings put on a happy face and a hollow smile, while clutching their fists in anger under the table. It is not the peace of minimum wage workers keeping silent on the issue of fair pay in order to keep their jobs. It is not the peace of consumers who knowingly purchase cheap goods from retailers who have exploitive business practices.

God's peace is anything but peaceful. It is disruptive, and it is divisive. And practicing it on a consistent basis? Well, that is extraordinarily difficult.

But still we try. We follow Jesus because he has shown a better way. He has shown us God's way. The way of justice, the way of mercy, the way of compassion and kindness.

I want to close with a comment I read on the internet. It was a comment written in response to an essay on this passage, and I think it gets to the heart of what probably many of us are thinking right now. Timothy Meadows comments, "As you know I wouldn't pick this text, because it demands the preacher to talk about the elephant in each sanctuary. A 'hot seat' that would not be satisfied with merely loving Jesus, but understanding that following Jesus means we are counter-cultural, we are not sitting in pews comfortably, and we are not always very nice among our own spiritual kin.

"...my thoughts turn to a homeless man I encountered in Memphis who screamed at me, 'don't you know what time it is?!' I wasn't at all sure. I felt caught in my own befuddled inability to respond; a silent participant in all that divides us in the world of power and privilege. I whipped out my credit card, hurriedly filled the gas tank on my Volvo to full. I locked the doors, drove off to the burbs with a burning inside my heart and the pain of estrangement. Clocked as a hypocrite, I continue to participate in the tension of competing delusions of peace."