

The First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham

“Living in Ordinary Time: Your Choice”

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Isaiah 5:1-7, Luke 12:49-56

Well, this passage from Luke certainly doesn't sound like the loving, benevolent, compassionate and peaceful Jesus we like to talk and preach about, does it? Earlier in this very chapter of Luke, Jesus has assured and reassured his followers of how precious they are in God's sight, and how they should not worry. Yes, just last week Amy started her sermon by reading these words to us from verse 32, “Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom.” This is the reassuring Jesus we like to think about.

Now, only 17 verses later, Jesus speaks of bringing fire, being stressed, and dividing up families. These words have a bite to them. Jesus appears to be on edge. Instead of sounding like a peace-maker, Jesus sounds like a home-breaker. What happened?

In preparing for this sermon, I learned that this is not a favored passage by preachers (shock!), and that many skip it when it comes up in the lectionary. And I must admit, I was tempted! But it's important. And it's important for us to remember that there is so much more to being a Christian than worshipping a “feel-good Jesus.” If we skipped this section of the lectionary, we would miss an essential side of Jesus. The side of Jesus that is demanding.

Before we go any further, I think it is critical that we set this in context. Earlier in Chapter 9, verse 51, we are told that Jesus “set his face to go to Jerusalem.” This seminal phrase must be kept in mind. When Jesus “set his face to go to Jerusalem”, it marks the beginning of the end of his earthly life. Jesus is running out of time to talk with the disciples about living their lives in total commitment to God. Jesus says he came to bring fire, and how he wished the fire were already kindled. He has a baptism with which to be baptized, and he is under stress until it is completed. Jesus is moving toward the completion of his earthly mission. He knows what lies ahead, and he wants it finished...accomplished.

Water and fire...two elements that each have the capability of destroying... and of purifying. Images that can lead to transformation. Fire can surely be destructive, but it can also be refining, and a way to transformation. This has been a very hot and dry summer, and the number of forest fires, especially in the west, has been staggering. And yes, some were caused by human error or intent. But many are burning as an act of nature. So much destruction.

But some trees...like the Jack Pine found here in Michigan, and the Sequoia...regenerate by fire... The giant sequoias of California grow to nearly 300 feet tall, and 50 feet in diameter. They are the world's largest trees in total volume. Their cones contain up to 200 seeds and mature in just two years. Once matured, those seeds remain in their cones and await a forest fire. The heat from the fire causes the cones to open and release their seeds. A dramatic, intense form of regeneration...and transformation.

Transformation, real transformation, is most often a painful process. Anyone who has gone through a personal transformation knows the pain of the process. An addict, going through withdrawal to become clean. A wrong-doer, taking the difficult steps toward reconciliation. A hater, struggling to put aside their preconceived notions to open their heart and mind.

It doesn't happen in an instant. Transformation really is a lifelong journey. And Jesus asks us to take this challenging and demanding journey. The one we call the Prince of Peace knows that his own nonviolent efforts to proclaim the kingdom of God will soon result in violence. Violence that others will inflict upon him at the cross. And more violence will follow.

Jesus has been preparing himself and his disciples. Christianity does not teach that we are saved by being martyrs. Few, if any of us, in 21st century North America will ever be in danger because of our belief in Christ. But Jesus does call for a loyalty so profound that we would be willing to make the most extreme sacrifice if necessary.

Jesus talks of bringing division. It is interesting to note that the divisions he names in the family are generational. The core social values in first century times had the family as the fundamental building block of society. A person's place in the family describes not only their personal identity, but their place in the community as well. Honoring one's parents was viewed by many as the highest social obligation. To divide a family was to leave its members on shaky ground, both socially and economically. It cut at the very base of the social structure.

Many of us hold the family structure as our most valued institution as well. So is Jesus saying that family is unimportant? Of course not. Scripture is very clear about honoring and loving one's parents, one's spouse...and even one's neighbor. But Jesus is saying, quite simply, that our first loyalty should be to him.

We, today, tend to determine our identity by our jobs, our families, our standing, our power. Jesus is calling us to define our identity by our relationship with God.

My mother and father had a solid marriage for 62 years until my father died. They had actually gone to school together since eighth grade and started dating in high school. After college, my father enlisted in the Navy, and right before he was shipped out, my mother took a crowded train to San Francisco and they got married. Apparently my grandfather had quite a talk with my mom, reminding her that my father might not come back from the war, or might come back quite different from the man she knew. But my mom had made a choice. And my mom was committed.

Earlier, when my parents were in college, my mom was mad at my dad about something and she gave his fraternity pin back to him. (My mom did later say that she kind of overreacted.) Anyway, I guess my dad came and found her and told her she needed to decide if she was, or wasn't with him. And I guess he ended his little speech, cocked his head and said, "Iz you is, or iz you ain't?" To which my mother apparently responded, "Ah Iz." Right before he shipped out, my mom gave my dad this I.D. bracelet. His

name is engraved on the front, and the inscription on the back says, “Ah Iz.” From then on, whenever my parents faced a tough situation like a job loss, or my father’s MS, or any number of other situations that come on life’s journey, they would look at the other and say, “Ah Iz.” They were committed to each other. As they grew together in life, as they stepped into the fire, their priority became God. God came to be first, and in the center of it all. God transformed them...as individuals, and as a couple.

I came across the bracelet this past week and it made me think of today’s scripture. The silver had to be melted, to go into the fire, and be transformed. My parents had to be melted, and transformed. And the choice of a commitment was made. “Ah Iz.”

Isn’t that what Jesus is asking of his disciples? Isn’t that what he is asking of us? We are offered a choice. We are offered the choice of choosing God to be the one primary relationship that determines who we are and what we do. To be first and foremost. And if we choose God first, it does shift things. It puts our careers, our nation, our possessions, this church, our family and friends...it puts all these things within the context of our relationship with God...with being disciples of Jesus.

Jesus was not naïve. Jesus was aware not only of what lay before him, but what lay before those he asked to follow him. He was aware that it would bring violence, conflict, and division. Still he asked. And he’s still asking today. Jesus is letting us know that to follow him is not easy. The more we are transformed...the more we change and refine habits, behaviors, beliefs and values... the more conflict and division we may feel at times. But through our transformation...then will we know true joy. The joy of Christ.

As Presbyterians, we say, “Reformed, always reforming.” As Christ followers, we are also always being transformed. As Jesus chastised those who predicted future weather but did not look around the present time, so he reminds us to not pick and choose what we turn a blind eye to. While we seek to make a better future, we are called to do it now. We turn our lives over to God, or we don’t. We follow Christ, or we don’t.

“I came to bring fire to the earth...Do you think I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division!” There are some who hear today’s scripture and want to turn away, or tremble at the severity of the words. But I hear God’s promise. “Come with me. Let me transform you. The process may be painful. But it is rich...and it is good.”

“Iz you is, or iz you ain’t?” It’s your choice.

Prayer:

Transforming God,

Guide us to make you our priority.

Give us the strength to choose you.

Let your Spirit fall afresh on us.

Melt us, mold us, fill us, use us.

Amen