

August 14, 2022. Rev Kathryn McGinnis

Let us pray. Open our ears and humble our hearts as we approach your Word read and proclaimed today, Great God. May we listen, discern, and follow the path you intend for us. Amen.

Our scripture for this morning comes from the gospel of Luke, chapter 12, verses 49-56. Listen now for the word of the lord.

⁴⁹“I have come to cast fire upon the earth, and how I wish it were already ablaze! ⁵⁰I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what constraint I am under until it is completed! ⁵¹Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division! ⁵²From now on five in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three; ⁵³they will be divided: father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law.” ⁵⁴He also said to the crowds, “When you see a cloud rising in the west, you immediately say, ‘It is going to rain,’ and so it happens. ⁵⁵And when you see the south wind blowing, you say, there will be scorching heat,’ and it happens. ⁵⁶You hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present time?

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

This text is a hard one. These words that Jesus says are hard to hear. This is not the Jesus we are used to. And that’s okay.

You probably feel a bit uncomfortable right now, hearing these harsh words from Jesus. And that’s okay. That’s normal.

It’s valid to feel uncomfortable when the Jesus we know preaches peace on earth and reconciliation, and yet here he preaches division.

But today, I want us to stay in that discomfort. Because even those these words from Jesus are hard to hear, we need to hear them. Even though this is not the Jesus we are used to, it is a Jesus worth knowing. It is a Jesus from whom we need to learn.

To grasp what Jesus is saying here, we need to zoom out and see the bigger picture. We need to understand what is going on and where this lies within Jesus’ journey.

Here, in our scripture today, Jesus is on the road to Jerusalem. In the gospel of Luke, Jesus begins his ministry in Galilee, and then in Chapter 9, verse 51 – Luke writes that Jesus sets his face to go to Jerusalem, and thus begins his journey.

And on this journey, on the road to Jerusalem, Jesus is preparing his disciples for the coming kingdom. For his coming baptism of suffering and death and resurrection.

He is teaching them his ways, his peace, his justice. He is causing trouble along the way – he has already angered religious leaders, and all the while Jesus knows what is going to happen in Jerusalem.

Time is running out to prepare his followers and they aren't getting it. They aren't understanding and they aren't prepared.

Thus, tension is building because they need to understand. And so that places us here in our scripture today – and here as the tension has built and built and time is running out,

Jesus speaks harsh words with passion and urgency to wake up his followers. To wake them up and understand that the kingdom is coming, and they need to be prepared.

The gospel of Luke begins and ends with peace. In chapter 1, verse 79, Zechariah prophesies that Jesus will “guide our feet into the way of peace.” The gospel ends with peace too. The resurrected Jesus appears in chapter 24 and offers a benediction of peace to his disciples.

So again, we are justifiably uncomfortable, shocked, and confused when Jesus says he is not here to bring peace.

But when we hear these words in light of the whole gospel – Jesus' whole life in ministry - This scripture is descriptive of Jesus' peace. Not prescriptive.

For the peace Jesus brings here on Earth does cause division. For the peace Jesus preaches is not an earthly peace.

Not our human notion of peace that ensures harmony by maintaining the status quo – by keeping power and greed and wealth in the hands of the powerful few, at the expense of the many that are powerless, without financial stability, without the means to live a life with dignity.

Jesus' peace overturns this system of systemic oppression. The peace that Jesus brings lifts up the lowly and denounces the powerful.

Throughout his whole ministry he preaches justice for those on the margins and condemns those who put them there. He preaches to give away your wealth, your earthly possessions – and give it to the poor.

As Richard Carlson explains, “these words assert that Jesus has not come validate human institutions and their values, but to initiate God's radical will.”

Humankind does not always appreciate this.

Those with power and wealth, those at the top of our social structures, will not take this as good news.

Those who are afraid and remain silent when faced with seeing injustices before them, they will not take this as good news.

Those who just want harmony, will not take this as good news.

SO here Jesus is telling his disciples, his followers, us, that his peace will cause division because not everyone will follow.

Families will be broken because those who follow will likely be cut off from their family.

In the first century world, the household is the fundamental building block for society. As Carlson again describes, “The household is regarded as a microcosm of social reality. By claiming to bring not peace but division and then illustrating such division in terms of the household, the text declares that Jesus’ missional advent is not the affirmation of the current social status quo but means its complete obliteration.

The gospel will cause division. It will set the world on fire. A fire that both cleanses and destroys.

In Jesus’ time it caused so much division that preaching his radical peace cost him his life. We know that by the end his own people demanded his crucifixion, because the peace he called them to live was too much. It broke them.

Yet this is the peace Christ calls us to. We are no stranger to the division Christ’s peace caused.

Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. is now revered as one of the great leaders of our nation – awaking our eyes to the injustices inflicted on African Americans and the pioneer of the civil rights movement – one of the most powerful movements in our history. He dedicated his whole to radical nonviolent resistance. He is the epitome of preaching Christ’ peace and living a life dedicated to making that peace a reality.

He demanded that we wake up and see how we were keeping harmony by keeping power in the hands of our country’s racist policies and systemic structure at the expense of black Americans, and he demanded we overturn it, and uphold the value of black lives.

We praise this gospel now, yet MLK caused such division that it too, cost him his life.

But in that division, that is where the gospel takes root. In the space that breaking, that dividing, opens – that is where God’s kingdom takes root here on Earth. That is where our country could begin the long road to atonement and equality. A road we are still on now.

In Christ’s time those who followed him were persecuted and lost their families, their place in society. Yet the family bonded together in Christ’s blood is stronger than the familial blood.

SO strong that this family grew and grew and grew and birthed the church. The very foundation on which our church today is built. The foundation made space for by division.

We are no stranger to division. We feel it now. And It is easy to remain silent. To keep the status quo and ignore those who suffer because it. We’re scared to speak up, because we know what the cost can be.

Yet here Jesus is passionately and urgently saying we cannot be silent. That facing this division is hard, but kingdom is worth it.

In 2013, our denomination faced division. PCUSA decided to, as a denomination, take a stand an openly and concretely affirm and celebrate the LGTBQ community. Affirm both LBGQTQ marriage and ordination. This caused division.

Churches left and it was painful. Our denomination as we knew it was broken.

And yet, because of this division, because we did not keep silent and took a stand. There will be kids who grow up in these very pews knowing that all sexuality and gender identity is beautiful and made in the image of God.

And as those kids grow up and as they discover who they are, and as some of them discover that they too are part of the LGBTQ community, they will never doubt that being made in the image of God encompasses and affirms and joyously celebrates being LGBTQ. Being queer.

This is where God's kingdom takes root. It doesn't take root when we are comfortable. When we are silent. When we ignore injustices to keep harmony.

Jesus is on his road to Jerusalem and time is running out. So, he speaks passionately and urgently.

Why have we lost that passion and urgency? Why do we think we have time? That we can start tomorrow or the next day?

That we can remain silent now and gather the courage to speak out tomorrow?

And maybe most importantly, why do we think silence and human harmony is better than God's kingdom?

Is better than living Christ's peace?

It's easier, yes, but there is such beauty in breaking. Breaking free from the duty we think we have to maintaining the status quo. And embracing our duty to God. To co-creating God's kingdom here on Earth.

There is beauty in breaking and seeing how Christ emerges from the fallen pieces and molds them anew in his passion and urgency. Molds them into God's kingdom and God's perfect peace.

These words that Jesus speaks here are shocking. They are uncomfortable. That's okay.

Because these words - they are good news. So, embrace the discomfort you feel upon hearing them.

It shows you're awake. Awake and ready to follow Christ's peace with passion and urgency. Knowing Christ is with you each and every step of the way.

Amen.