

“Reading the Signs”
Luke 12:49-56
Sunday, August 15, 2010
United Methodist Church of Yucaipa
Rev. Sharon Snapp-Kolas, preaching

Scripture. Prayer.

Opening:

Frank Rothfuss tells this story of a Baptist pastor fresh out of seminary. The young man was assigned to a small church in the hills of Kentucky. In his first sermon, he condemned gambling, especially betting on the horses. The sermon was not well received. "You see, Reverend," a parishioner explained, "this whole area is known for its fine horses. Lots of our members make their living breeding race horses."

The next Sunday the pastor spoke on the evils of smoking, and again, his sermon was not well received – for many of his members also grew tobacco. The third week the pastor preached on the evils of drinking, only to discover, after, that a major distillery was one of the town's largest employers.

Chastised for his choice of sermon topics, the frustrated pastor exclaimed, "Well, then, what can I preach about?" A kindly, older woman spoke up and said, "Pastor, preach against those godless Communists. Why, there isn't a Communist within 4,000 miles of here!"

Jesus earned a reputation for preaching sermons that were challenging and demanding, radical and divisive. In our Gospel reading for today we have just such a sermon – one that challenges us on many levels.

I. The Sign of Fire

In it, Jesus describes his purpose. He has come to cast fire upon the earth, to be baptized with suffering and death, and to bring division between parent and child. The disciples think he has come to bring peace, but he corrects this faulty impression.

Jesus says that he wishes the fire were kindled already. Now the idea of God's cleansing fire is present throughout scripture. It is not meant to strike terror in our hearts, but rather to make us aware of the seriousness of God's purpose in the world.

Jesus is anxious for the kingdom to come in fullness. This fire for which Jesus longs is reminiscent of the fire of which John the Baptist speaks when he is baptizing people in the wilderness. He says, "I baptize you with water; but he who is mightier than I is coming, the thong of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie; he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor, and to gather the wheat into his granary, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire." Likewise, this fire image takes us forward to the time of Pentecost in the Book of Acts. The power of the Holy Spirit comes in the form of fire, as both Jesus and John the Baptist had predicted, "And there appeared to them tongues as of fire, distributed and resting on each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance."

Wallace H. Kirby offers a good explanation of the image of fire in scripture. He writes: "C. S. Lewis once said that the gospel was concerned to create 'new people' not just 'nice people.' The human need is an inner transformation that makes us into new creatures. It is the warmth of the spirit of Christ that accomplishes this. This is not

something we can do for ourselves; it is the New Testament insistence upon grace and gift, not work and merit. We cannot make ourselves into the sort of persons who are recognizable as sons and daughters of God; the heart of the Christian testimony makes this clear. Not even a courageous and serious understanding of the first fire, Christ's judgment, can remedy our impoverishment before God. It takes the second fire of Christ's spirit to inspire and sustain the growth of love and grace within us.”

In my understanding of Kirby’s point, we ought not to focus too much on fire as an image of judgment. Jesus took care of that with his sacrifice for us on the cross.

What we ought to focus on is the fire of the Holy Spirit. If we welcome, receive and accept that Spirit, our hearts will burst with flames of love. This is the fire Jesus yearns for us to receive.

II. The Sign of Division

At the same time, with the fire of the Spirit comes division. We must accept the hard fact that following Jesus may mean division and strife. If we are truly working for the Kingdom of God, we will likely offend some of the folks some of the time.

When the Holy Spirit came at Pentecost, the fire of the kingdom spread rapidly throughout the known world, thanks to Peter and Paul and the other apostles. But this fire also brought division, just as Jesus had predicted. Family members reported their Christian kin to the Pharisees.

Before Paul became a Christian he took part in the persecution of Christians and no doubt used family spies to discover Christians in hiding. In the early church family divisions were a common experience. Staunch Jews turned Christians over to the

authorities to be executed. The Romans persecuted both Jews and Jewish Christians. People everywhere were suffering for their faith. The fire had been kindled.

During his earthly ministry, Jesus talks to the disciples about his purpose. He tells them about the fire that is to come, the baptism of suffering which he is to face, and the divisions between family members which his kingdom may require. His Kingdom brings unexpected demands. We may not be ready. The disciples expected Jesus to bring peace. Instead he brought turmoil. Jesus did not only disrupt to the worlds of religion and politics. He also brought strife to the intimate setting of the family.

Jesus lays it out in generational terms. Son against father; mother against daughter; daughter-in-law against mother-in-law. Most families have these kinds of generational divisions. This includes church families.

Divisions arise when the fire of the Spirit moves. This is Jesus' point.

We could list countless divisive issues for contemporary Christianity. Discussions about economics, race, defense, capital punishment, abortion, and many other issues can raise voice levels at any family gathering.

Jesus offers little comfort concerning the conflicts that the kingdom causes. Jesus doesn't even offer clues as to how any of these conflicts might be resolved. We cannot know for certain that we are on the "right" side of any single issue. The only thing we can know is that Jesus wants us out there in the middle of the conflict. Jesus wants us to embrace the divisions. Jesus wants us to live out our Christian convictions boldly. Or so it seems from this passage of scripture.

The cleansing fire of God's Spirit will let us know when we are headed in the wrong direction. But only if we actually choose a direction. If we sit on our spiritual

laurels, content with past accomplishments, or if we cower in a corner, afraid of the conflict, the kingdom will pass us by. This is the message that Jesus tries to communicate to his slow witted disciples. That same message is meant for you and for me.

For some folks – both then and now -- Jesus' words of division are a comfort. For those who have already forsaken family to follow Christ, it is reassuring to know that Jesus said it would be so. Remember, in first century Israel, family members are turning over family members to the authorities. In the midst of this persecution, it could be comforting to know that Jesus predicted such chaos.

However, for those of us for whom commitment to Jesus is one of many commitments we have made, these words are a challenge. We've been taught that being a good Christian means fitting into society in a respectable way. If we have a good family, a job, and a place to live, and if we go to church now and then, we want to trust that we are followers of Christ.

William H. Beljean writes about a sociology professor. This professor every year begins his course on "The Family" by reading to his class a letter, from a parent, written to a government official. In the letter the parent complains that his son, once obedient and well motivated, has become involved with some weird new religious cult. The father complains that the cult has taken over the boy's life, has forced him to forsake all of his old friends, and has turned him against his family.

After reading the letter, the professor asks the class to speculate what the father is talking about. Almost without exception, the class immediately assumes that the subject of the letter is a child mixed up with the "Moonies," or some other controversial group.

After the class puts out all of the possible conclusions they can think of, the professor surprises them by revealing that the letter was written by a third century father in Rome, the governor of his province, complaining about this weird religious group called "The Christians."

We prefer the passages of scripture that give us comfort and peace and assurance. But today's reading from Luke reminds us that the Holy Spirit moves in unpredictable ways. And sometimes that Spirit fans the flames of division and controversy. Sometimes that Spirit stirs up trouble in families, in churches, and in the whole of human society.

III. Interpreting the Signs of God

The interpretation of the signs is plain -- to Jesus, anyway. This is the interpretation: The Holy Spirit is a Comforter, yes. The Holy Spirit is also a cleansing fire that shakes up the status quo.

The multitudes are completely oblivious to the meaning of Jesus' presence. And so he tries to wake them up to the signs of the times. The kingdom is at hand; they must make themselves ready; they must follow Jesus now while the time is ripe.

Steve Molin writes of a teenage girl at summer camp, in his book, Flashing Yellow Lights. She "was torn between two sets of friends," as he tells it. "Some of them were sunbathing on the dock, saying to her 'stay with us.' But her other friends were in a rowboat saying 'no, come with us.' There she stood, one foot on the dock, the other foot on the edge of the boat, and the boat was moving. Trying to appease everyone, trying to not decide, she ended up falling into the water; and worse, her hair got wet!

"But I think this is exactly what Jesus is addressing in the gospel lesson today," Molin continues. "He is warning us that there will be times when following him will

require us to turn away from something else. There will be times in this life when we will be required to say 'yes' to one thing, and therefore 'no' to the other. And of course, the action we most often take is the same one that girl did on the swimming dock. We try to go in both directions. We try to say 'yes' to it all, and we end up falling in between the seams, and being miserable.”

To the multitudes Jesus addresses his comments about the signs of the times. He tries to shake them up, so they will open their eyes and make a choice.

The people can make predictions concerning the weather, he says; why can't they see what Jesus' presence in their midst means for the future? From the multitudes we learn that we are to watch the signs of the times and to follow Jesus accordingly. Just as Jesus' times were full of crisis, so are the times in which we live. The “how” of following Jesus is not any easier now than it was back then. We must take Jesus' warning seriously. He warned the multitudes that they would ignore the signs of the times to their peril. The same is true for us. If we deny the urgency of the kingdom then we leave ourselves and others open to the spiritual perils of our times.

One such peril is the desire to look at the world through rose colored glasses. We're told that if we would only think positive thoughts we could heal all diseases, end all wars, and abolish poverty. Jesus removes the rose colored glasses and gives us a hard lesson that we may not want to hear. He tells us that things may get worse before they get better. Conflicts between people may have to escalate before God's peace finally reigns. We must be sensitive to the signs of our times and prepare ourselves for difficult days ahead. God requires only that we be faithful to the kingdom. God must come first in our lives, even if it means abandoning family, friends, jobs, and reputations.

If God's work requires us to be in conflict with our parents or our children, then we, as followers of Christ, must accept that role. If God's mission requires that we bring division to the world rather than peace, then we, as Jesus' disciples, must rise to the task. We do not decide God's agenda. We do not define God's peace. We do not decide what God's kingdom looks like. If we choose to follow Christ, we make a commitment to God's peace, God's agenda, God's kingdom.

Closing:

And so we may find ourselves asking this question. Is Jesus safe?

C. S. Lewis touches on this topic in his most popular Narnia book, The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe. I close with this excerpt, in which Mr. and Mrs. Beaver talk with the children about meeting Aslan. You may remember that Aslan is the Lion who plays the Christ figure in the story. Mr. Beaver says to the children:

"Wrong will be right, when Aslan comes in sight,
At the sound of his roar, sorrows will be no more,
When he bares his teeth, winter meets its death
And when he shakes his mane, we shall have spring again.
You'll understand when you see him."

"But shall we see him?" asked Susan.

"Why, Daughter of Eve, that's what I brought you here for. I'm to lead you where you shall meet him," said Mr. Beaver.

"Is--is he a man?" asked Lucy.

"Aslan a man!" said Mr. Beaver sternly. "Certainly not. I tell you he is the King of the wood and the son of the great Emperor-Beyond-the-Sea. Don't you know who is the King of Beasts? Aslan is a lion--THE Lion, the great Lion."

"Ooh!" said Susan, "I'd thought he was a man. Is he--quite safe? I shall feel rather nervous about meeting a lion."

"That you will, dearie, and no mistake," said Mrs. Beaver, "if anyone who can appear before Aslan without their knees knocking, they're either braver than most or else just silly."

"Then he isn't safe?" said Lucy.

"Safe?" said Mr. Beaver. "Don't you hear what Mrs. Beaver tells you? Who said anything about safe? 'Course he isn't safe. But he's good. He's the King, I tell you."

Jesus is not safe. He brings division and strife and fire. But he is good. He is our King. And therein lies our comfort and our peace. May you read the signs of His grace, and choose to follow. Amen.