

Grace Episcopal Church
August 18, 2013

Sermon by Rev. Gloria Hopewell, D.Min
Text: Luke 12: 49-56

Sing: "What a friend we have in Jesus, all our sin and grief to bear. What a privilege to carry everything to God in prayer."

This is just one of the comforting hymns and songs about Jesus that we might have learned in Sunday School or in church with images like the shepherd that supplies our needs, the Jesus we want to walk with us. They go along with the Sunday School room pictures of Jesus with the lamb around his shoulders or sitting in a field of flowers with the curly-haired children surrounding him.

Hardly the picture of the Jesus we see in today's Gospel text—a Jesus who brings fire upon the earth. Who declares that he has not come to bring peace but division. Huh? Isn't this the one called "prince of peace," the one who boils the law down to a love of God and neighbor?

At first glance—maybe even second and third—this seems to be a text we could easily do without on a pleasant summer Sunday. In fact, if my e-mails and clergy blogs are an indication, many preachers are doing exactly that today—I've never seen such wailing and gnashing of teeth. But we are going to stay with it.

This Jesus who brings fire and division shouldn't be a surprise to us—we see glimpses all along throughout Luke's gospel. Even before his birth. This past week we celebrated the Feast Day of Mary, Mother of Jesus, and read the Magnificat—Mary's song. It is hardly a tender lullaby. It talks of scattering the proud, casting down the powerful from their thrones—a song of justice and promise. Then, when Jesus is presented as an infant in the Temple, the aged Simeon declares his purpose and the sword that will pierce Mary's heart. At age twelve, of course, he perplexes his parents by taking his place in "his Father's house," the Temple. And, then, there's that famous passage where he tells his concerned mother and siblings that his family consists of those who follow God.

As he moves into his public ministry, the glimpses continue...his first sermon angers the people of his hometown as he quotes Isaiah about releasing the captives and freeing the oppressed...and that it is he who is anointed to bring good news to the poor. He calls people to follow him and does not allow them to return home first to take care of their affairs or to bury their dead—they must follow immediately. He tells them that those who follow will suffer, will be reviled, and maybe persecuted.

So, this Jesus we meet this morning should not be a surprise. Nor is the idea of division. I do not think it is inconsistent with the shepherd, the healer, the friend. It is not an “either/or.” We tend, though, to domesticate him by focusing more – or entirely – on those images. That Jesus is more comfortable than the one we see today.

Remember that all through these weeks of Luke, we have been reading about the time in which Jesus turned his face to Jerusalem – his last, long journey that would end with his crucifixion. There is a keen sense of urgency as his time for teaching and readying the disciples grows shorter and shorter. Is it possible to see Jesus’ fire and sword as his passion for his mission to bring God’s Kingdom into being? Is it possible to see him as frustrated and disappointed – stressed out – at the chasm between his vision and the reality all around him, at the slowness of his disciples to get with the program?

Goodness. Division was right there around Jesus. It was present in Luke’s community decades later. It is certainly here now, and has been part of human life since the very beginning. The text almost poses division and peace as opposites. But I wonder. What is peace, anyway? Is it the absence of conflict and disagreement? Or can there be peace within challenge, struggle, and difference? Is division always bad?

When I was younger – the years of suburban motherhood trying to balance the needs of my family with the demands of work that involved frequent business travel and long hours – I imagined peace in terms of a quiet island where I could go off all by myself (or with a very few, quiet friends), read and write, and gaze out at still water. There would be nothing to disturb or ruffle this gentle solitude. Evening would consist of a simple meal, a glass of wine, and quiet conversation with compatible friends who shared my thoughts and ideas. Heaven.

It was just a bit later that I began to understand another kind of peace. It was actually when I became involved in the church community that bears responsibility for pushing me into ordained ministry. It was a community of passionate people. Passionate, vocal people who had different points of view. This always was evident at annual meetings when the budget was presented. There were those who wanted to give almost everything away – there was a longstanding goal, never quite reached, of giving 25% of the budget to mission. There were others who believed that we had to be good stewards of the building we inhabited. That we shouldn’t let the roof go too much longer without repair. That we should be attentive to the aging furnaces and need for asbestos removal.

These were lively annual meetings. And for the first few years, I sat there with my stomach in knots as people stood to argue their points. It took me a while to realize that as loud and strong as these arguments were, the people truly loved and respected one another. And all of them were faithful in their walk with Christ. Oh, they might get annoyed, shake their heads, and mutter things like, “there goes Bob again, why doesn’t he get off his soap box?” Or, “that guy has a business. Doesn’t he realize that you can’t keep good staff when you don’t give them a raise for three years running?” (This was in the day when those of us in the corporate world were getting 8-10%.) We always came to

some agreement, not fully satisfactory to either group. And then, the next year, back we came.

But in the end, we were changed. We were challenged out of our comfort zones and reminded each other how to be faithful—in spite of our differences, our divisions. The trick, I guess, was that those divisions were not unbridgeable. It was a “both/and.” We came to see our building as a place from which to do our ministry—not as a museum or temple. It needed upkeep, but not lavish improvements. We took seriously our call to be advocates for the poor, the needy, and those who were victims of our justice system, not just by serving in soup kitchens and shelters, though we did that, but by participating in tangible ways of trying to change unjust systems and institutions. Not everyone did everything. Not everyone was passionate about every issue. But there was space for all of it. And we learned.

So, my peaceful island image changed a bit. There is still the water, but I see beauty and power in the waves when the wind is fierce. There is still the group of friends, the simple meal, the glass of wine, but the conversation stretches us and reminds us that we need not “smooth things over” or avoid certain topics because what we are about is bigger than our differences. And we hope that our lives will make a difference and will bring God’s Kingdom just a step or two closer.

The take-aways for me from pondering this text that I would have preferred to avoid are these:

- Jesus could not have avoided the sword and division. His entire purpose of inaugurating God’s Kingdom was in direct opposition to the culture and government of his time. His love for humanity had to go beyond healing and teaching and into the realm of transformation.
- Our world has the same problems, and we are called to love as Jesus loved. Sadly, our churches tend to default to the comfortable side—being “nice,” sweeping disagreements and differences of opinion under the rug, not creating a fuss.
- Ultimately, God’s Kingdom of love will prevail.

I end with a statement that I often quote from an Episcopal priest colleague of mine. She says, “If the Gospel isn’t changing you/us, it isn’t worth a rat’s tail.”

Amen.