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“An Insatiable Appetite for God’s Shalom”

A sermon by Mindy L. Douglas

20th Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year C)

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Luke 12:49-56

OK. OK. I know. This is not an easy passage. I see you squirming in your seats already, and I guarantee you, I have been squirming in mine all week. So as we begin, let me remind you a little about the message of peace in the gospel of Luke. In the first chapter of Luke, the prophet Zechariah refers to Jesus as the one who will “guide our feet into the way of peace” (1:79). At the end of the Gospel, Jesus offers words of peace to his disciples following his resurrection: “Peace be with you” (24:36). Our text from last week has Jesus calming the disciples by saying, “Do not be afraid, little flock” (12:32).

Within this literary framework [asks one scholar], how might we understand Jesus’ statement that he brings... division and not peace? How can the one who tells a parable of reconciliation between father and son be the same one who sets parents against their children and children against their parents? ... In light of his own example and the testimony of his preaching, what can Jesus’ words of division possibly mean?¹

What indeed? The answers are not crystal clear on initial reading. I would hazard a guess that very few preachers this week will choose to preach from this text. Why choose a text where Jesus, who had seemed so peaceful and encouraging earlier in the same chapter, now speaks of fire and division? I have asked myself this very

¹ Audrey West, “Luke 12:49-56, Theological Perspective,” in *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Volume 2, David Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 358.

question multiple times throughout the week. But I chose this text ultimately because I think it does have something to say to us and because I think it can't be taken at face value.

It helps to understand the context of the passage. In this case, Jesus is speaking directly to his disciples and has already “set his face toward Jerusalem” (9:51) where he knows that suffering and betrayal and death await him. He is stressed out (are you as comforted by this as I am?) and he starts off hot: “I have come to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled!”

When we hear the word fire in the gospels, we often think of the fire about which John the Baptist preached, which was a fire of judgment. But, as David Lose reminds us:

Fire is a multivalent Biblical image. It can represent the presence of God—think pillar of fire in Exodus (13:17-22) and the tongues of flame at Pentecost (Acts 2:1-4). It can also represent [end times] judgment—in Revelation Satan and his army are consumed by fire (20:7-10). Fire also represents purification. Zachariah (13:9) and Malachi (3:2-3) each refer to God's intention to purify Israel like a refiner purifies silver by fire... Jesus... embodies the presence of God which simultaneously judges and purifies.²

Immediately following this, Jesus refers to his baptism. The baptism Jesus will be baptized with also represents judgment and purification and here alludes to the cross, which is a part of his mission, and his stress [which makes *our* stress seem a little petty, don't you think?].

And then comes the part most of us don't like—where family members turn against each other, divisions reign supreme, and there is no peace. How could this be coming from Jesus? Isn't he the one who tells us to love each other?

I cannot help but think of many family meals at Thanksgiving, Christmas, or other holiday gatherings where certain topics of conversation are strictly forbidden—

² http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=733, (8-12-16)

politics, for instance. Woe to the one who brings up politics at a table full of family members who are at different ends of the political spectrum and happen to believe very passionately about candidates, policies and issues. Woe to that one, indeed. Likely many of us have been around a table when this has happened and after loud, passionate, and sometimes irate exchanges, the family is divided and go their separate ways in disgust and mama sighs and says, “Why can’t we all just get along? Why can’t we have a civil meal just once? It’s not so much to ask, is it?”

So we don’t talk about politics around the table. Some families also avoid conversation about religion, or sex, or football, or basketball. We sacrifice depth of conversation and bridge building in order to “keep the peace.”

That is what we often think of when we think of peace in our families.

But there are things much darker than politics which separate families—drugs, alcohol, physical abuse, verbal abuse, psychological abuse. When people turn away from God and toward themselves or quick fixes of the world, there can be no peace.

There are also families which have been torn apart by differences they didn’t understand and couldn’t accept. What about the gay man who can hide his sexuality no longer and reveals to his family who he really is? How many families have been split apart by anger, shame, judgment and even hatred (which are not on the list of the fruits of the Spirit!)? In the same way, how many families have shunned family members because they have married outside of their race or religion or class? These are real ways that families are torn apart and no one would say that this is good.

The divisions about which Jesus speaks are different kinds of divisions. They are divisions created by a *new order*, writes Lose:

governed not by might but by forgiveness..., not by fear but by courage..., and not by power but by humility.... Yet those invested in the present order; those lured by the temptations of wealth, status, and power; and those who rule now will resist this coming kingdom for it spells an end to what they

know and love (or at least have grown accustomed to). Hence Jesus—though coming to establish a rule of peace—brings division, even to the most intimate and honored of relationships, that among family.³

Choosing Jesus in our country is often, but not always, a fairly benign act. Choosing Jesus in some other countries around the world can be a deadly decision, and some families will not hesitate to disown a family member who has chosen to follow Jesus, who has brought shame to the family. This is easy to forget, as we sit comfortably in our pews each Sunday, but choosing Jesus has not been and still is not in many places a safe or easy thing to do. Some of you here today, I imagine, have lost relationships in order to be here and follow Jesus.

In all likelihood, Luke writes his Gospel to an early Christian community who have found that their decision to follow Jesus has had lasting and irreparable effects on their family relationships. In this way, the passage is *descriptive* rather than *prescriptive*.⁴ Luke is describing the divisions that have already taken place. Families had already been divided by their choice to follow Jesus and his message of forgiveness and reconciliation. Consider the parable of the Prodigal Son. The father's acceptance and forgiveness of his younger son infuriates the older son and damages the relationship between father and older son, older son and younger son. The father's mercy and grace cannot be tolerated and disrupts the older son's status quo in such a way that he is unable not only to forgive his brother, but he is also not able to forgive his father.

This is what this passage is about, I think. Jesus knows that when we follow him—when we really follow him—life will not be easy and division may occur.

The church is not a stranger to division, of course. We have been divided over the issue of slavery. We have been divided over civil rights. We have been divided over women's ordination. We have been divided over ordination and marriage of LGBTQ women and men. Pastors and parishioners have walked out of churches that wanted to remain segregated. Whole families have left churches that have voted for gay marriage. Denominations have split. New denominations have

³ Lose, 2.

⁴ West, 360.

started. Peace as it is understood as “why can’t we all just get along” has not been a part of these divisions. And yet, these divisions have come about when people have sought to follow Jesus and hunger and thirst for God’s *shalom*, the Hebrew word which means much more than just getting along.

God’s shalom is a deeper peace—it is a peace that mends the torn fabric of creation and brings about justice in an unjust world. Like the Asian term *sangaeng* (where all work for the well-being of others), and the African word *ubuntu* (the connectedness between all people), God’s shalom is deep with meaning for God’s people. It is a peace that is connected to the inbreaking of God’s kingdom. “The coming of the kingdom meant spiritual reunion between God and humanity through the forgiveness of sins and reconciling love,”⁵ writes Craig Nesson. At the Lord’s Supper, “we discover the essence of shalom” [where] “all are welcome and there is enough for all...”⁶

The God Jesus points us toward is the “God who defends the poor, protects the weak, does justice for the oppressed and insists on righteousness on the part of those who rule.”⁷ Jesus knows that while this means good news for the poor and the weak, it also means bad news for the status quo and for those who benefit from the way things are. And let’s be honest. As Audrey West writes:

Humankind does not always appreciate the gospel’s great reversals. We do not like it when those we deem undeserving receive the abundant grace promised to all. ... Jealousy, anger, desire for revenge, resistance to change: these can consume us in the face of the gospel, to the point that we find ourselves antagonists against those whom Jesus welcomes.⁸

In ways that make us super uncomfortable, we have to realize that Jesus is saying something big here—that we are not called just to “get along” if it means that in doing so we cannot follow the gospel, we cannot follow Jesus, and we cannot love our neighbor because makes us or our families uncomfortable. Following Jesus

⁵ *Shalom Church*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 11.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ West, 362

means caring for the oppressed, speaking out for the marginalized, causing division sometimes, even in our own families for causes of justice that may shake up the status quo in order to mend the torn fabric of creation, in order to bring the peace on earth that is kingdom peace, that is God's shalom, that is radically world-changing. If we are to follow Jesus in this world, we must challenge ourselves to confront the racism in ourselves we don't even recognize and about which we cannot speak. If we are to follow Jesus in this world, we must speak out against racist acts, violence, hatred, and oppression. If we are to follow Jesus in this world, we must fight to change policies that benefit some but oppress many. If we are to follow Jesus in this world, we must listen to him and find ways to interpret the present time as clearly as we interpret the rain that falls upon our shoulders, so that we can call out injustice and work for righteousness and reconciliation.

Who are the oppressed? Who are the marginalized? Who are the afflicted? We must *know* them. We must *see* them. We must listen to them. We must work with them. *They* are our brothers and sisters.

When we join with Jesus in his work of compassion, mercy, justice, and shalom, we follow him in mending the torn fabric of creation. May everything we do here and in our lives help us identify the path to God's shalom and give us an insatiable appetite for it.

In the name of the Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer. Amen.

Because sermons are meant to be preached and are therefore prepared with the emphasis on verbal presentation (i.e., are written for the ear), the written accounts occasionally deviate from proper and generally accepted principles of grammar and punctuation. Most often, these deviations are not mistakes per se, but are indicative of an attempt to aid the listener in the delivery of the sermon.

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