

## Luke 12: 49-56    The Peace You Choose

So, what happened to Jesus Christ, the prince of peace? Fire? Is he talking about the fire and brimstone from hell? Baptism? But wasn't Jesus already baptized in the Jordan River by John the Baptist? At first glance, Jesus's words here sound as if he temporarily forgot who he was, or the gospel writer Luke, who had been writing an orderly account of Jesus's life mixed up a page from another one of his writing projects by mistake. So disturbingly out of character are these words of Jesus and so strangely out of place this passage sounds. This is the one when a preacher, upon finding out this is the pericope assigned for this Sunday, would be tempted to go looking elsewhere for a more preachable passage.

The word Gospel means "Good News." The Gospel writers are writing the "good news of Jesus Christ." We approach the Gospel trusting this premise and we pray the prayer for illumination, as we do every Sunday, to shed the light of understanding in our hearts. So, when it is not easy to see a good news in a passage at first glance, we don't want to just ignore or dismiss it but take it as an invitation to go deeper in search of the treasure that is good news of Jesus Christ. And there are ways that help us.

Last week we talked about how a “pericope,” a segment of the Scripture reading, is better understood in the context of what has happened before, like watching an episode in a TV series. So, let’s step back a bit from this pericope to take in a larger view.

If you recall, for several weeks now, we’ve been following Jesus in the Gospel of Luke after Jesus had “set his face toward Jerusalem.” Jesus is determined to journey all the way to Jerusalem, to the heart of the religious and political world in his time. What awaits Jesus in Jerusalem? His disciples do not know yet, but Jesus knows that his teaching and healing ministry on this journey will lead to his death on the cross in Jerusalem.

I’ve heard people say, “Jesus came to die for our sins.” But he was not born just to die. God did not drop him from heaven at the foot of the cross to be the sacrificial lamb as if his death on the cross was a mere ritual death. God sent Jesus as a lamb into the wolves, and we read earlier in the gospel that Jesus would send his disciples into the world in the same way, because the world needed to be shown the life-giving way of God, so they would turn around and be saved from the death-blowing way of the world.

So, how Jesus walked his journey to Jerusalem has everything to do with how he died on the cross. Jesus’s words and actions reflect how things are done in the kingdom of God, but when done here on

earth, they inevitably expose the hypocrisy, corruption and oppression, the injustice and lies of the present world. He would naturally upset the power-that-be of this world, because they were intent on managing those things to “keep peace on earth.”

The fire Jesus came to bring to the earth is his work that demonstrated the way of God, in direct conflict with the ways of the world, burning them up like fire at contact. And Jesus would not stop teaching and healing on the way to Jerusalem, until finally, the hands of those who opposed his way put stop to it by crucifying him, or so they thought.

“I have a baptism with which to be baptized and what stress I am under until it is completed!” Just as Jesus came out of the water in his baptism, God raised Jesus out of this suffering and death, into new life. Jesus’s ministry that started with his baptism by the water, is to be completed with the baptism of the passion, of his death on the cross and resurrection. “What stress I am under until it is completed!”

So, that’s where Jesus was coming from when he said those startling things.

And what about the division, rather than peace. Where else do we hear Jesus promoting division over peace? It’s a very dangerous passage if it’s taken out of context! In addition to considering the immediate context of a passage, another way to understand a passage

that puzzles us is to interpret it by another Scripture passage, or in light of the entire Bible, for that matter, since God speaks to us through the entirety of the Holy Scriptures that include all the writings in the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament.

But here, we only need to look a bit further in the Gospel. This is the same Gospel of Luke where we hear the wonderful story of reconciliation between a father and a son known as the parable of the prodigal son. But there is another less noticed, almost hidden message about division in that parable. In that story, the mercy and forgiveness the Father showed toward the prodigal son creates division in the family because the older brother becomes jealous of his brother.

This older brother, who had obeyed his father and had done everything he was supposed to do, cannot accept the compassion and mercy of the Father toward his brother. He doesn't think the little brother deserves it and he refuses to join in the celebration that the one who had been lost has returned. Division is created by the rejection of God's justice, which is always mercy and forgiveness. The just order of God's world ruled by mercy and forgiveness, turns the accepted order of our world upside down and the resulting division is inevitable. Jesus did not bring division as a means or even

as an end, but it is a consequence that goes with our choice to live as the children of God's kingdom here on earth, or not.

But, why does Jesus have to reject peace in the process? He says "Do you think I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division." I just mentioned that those in power were hard at work "managing the world under their rule" to keep peace on earth. Jesus was born during the time called "Pax Romana," the Roman Peace. This was the time of relative peace marked by the absence of wars among nations in the Mediterranean world, from 27 BC to 180 CE, but it was a peace maintained at the cost of the oppressed lives of the poor and the vulnerable, and tyrannical emperors killed political rivals as Rome brutally suppressed revolts in provinces including Judea.

Pax Romana, into which Jesus was born, was a peace propped up by exploitation, oppression, and persecution of anyone who resisted the imperial rule. It was a peace at the cost of the powerless. Pax Christi, on the other hand, is the Peace of Christ, that gives voice to the voiceless and does not tolerate injustice. In the ministry of Jesus, God is acting toward the world with God's peace and the peace in the sense of status quo is disrupted. Can you recall the words of Jesus in the Gospel of John. "Peace, I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives."

Injustice tolerated and even actively used in Pax Romana has no place in Pax Christi. We don't live in the Roman Empire, but that kind of false peace is all too familiar.

Pax Romana or Pax Christi, which Peace do you choose? To choose Christ's peace is to commit ourselves to the way of justice, mercy, and compassion, even when doing so would bring us into conflict with others. When we find ourselves in the moment of such discernment, whether as a country at war or just plain town folks in dispute, we are eager to claim, "God is on our side." Well, God is always on God's side. The question is, are we on God's side? What action would bring us to God's side?

Now I'm talking in terms of a bigger social dynamics, but our response to this moment of discernment impacts all areas of our lives, down to our family relationships. Jesus said the division will fall upon the household, putting father and son, mother and daughter, mother-in-law and daughter-in-law against each other. It can affect our friendships and the relationships in the church family, too. For our discernment to follow Christ shows up in the aspects of our lives that are considered "political," too. The issues that have split the Church over her long history are countless, and such division is always very painful, not to mention the pain of such division within our own family.

So, if this passage in Luke points out to us that the decision to follow the way of Christ causes painful division, where is the Good News? Again, we listen for the testimonies from other parts of the Scripture that speaks to such division. Even as Jesus speaks of the household of five dividing into two and three, he does not talk of hate. We think, when people get divided over issues, they must end up hating each other; and, sadly, we often do. But what does the Scripture say about such relationships?

In the same Gospel of Luke, we hear Jesus saying, “But I say to you that listen, love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you... If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them...But love your enemies... and you will be children of the Most High; for God is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.” God shows mercy to all. God would not tolerate the injustice of Pax Romana, or whatever the political party you fill the blank in, but even those who are pushing such agenda are not outside God’s mercy.

And Paul in Romans 12:18 says “If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.” Division precedes reconciliation.

As you choose your peace, the division with those who choose otherwise is inevitable, but that does not mean we should not continue to care for them, pray for them, and love them, even as we continue to stand with the vulnerable, the weak, the powerless and the marginalized, as Jesus did.

With Jesus's ministry, the kingdom of God was breaking in upon history. Division is not Jesus's goal, but he calls out the division that exists in our world. In naming that division, Jesus is acknowledging all is not quite well with our world. It's a blessing that our God is One who does not avert eyes from the painful reality of divisions, when we'd rather pretend they don't exist.

How do you read the present time? Like Jesus says, you who live in this valley know very well the appearance of earth and sky and pay attention, because it affects how we live. Jesus wants us to pay attention to the state of the world, the big world as well as the small world of our personal lives and everything in between. What would it look like to be on God's side in this conflicted world? Will we have courage to choose rightly?

It's a challenging task, but as today's passage from Hebrews reminds us, we have forerunners of faith cheering us on, that great cloud of witness. And we have Jesus who is our most reliable guide.



May God grant us wisdom to know and courage to be on God's side of the divide. Amen.