

Isaiah 5: 1 - 7
Heb. 11: 29 – 12:2
Luke 12: 49-56
13 Pentecost, Proper 15

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Bainbridge Island, Washington
August 14, 2016

“Interpret the Present Time”

The protests had been brewing for years. People were writing articles, making speeches, circulating pamphlets, and finally began to demonstrate in the streets. Families were badly divided, friendships ended because of the rising emotions of this issue. Thoughtful people were caught in the middle and were attacked by both sides. Fringe members argued for greater disobedience and even argued for violence on one side and calls for stronger reprisals and “get tough” legislation came from the other side. The level of vitriol in the writings on both sides increased. Charges of fomenting revolution were in the air. Calmer voices had called for delays, asserting that the country was not ready for this change; more time was needed. Other sought smaller victories in local areas, while others called for nothing less than radical change right now. Finally, in the summer, the marches ended in violence as protestors were beaten by angry on-lookers and then the protestors were arrested and jailed. Some took up hunger strikes in protest and they were force-fed with tubes in their noses or throats. Some families of these protestors were so appalled by this disruptive behavior that they believed their protestor to be deranged and had them incarcerated in mental institutions and a few underwent electro-shock therapy to bring them to their senses. Across the land it was division; across the land it was a time of divided households; across the land it was mother against daughter and daughter against mother, father against son and son against father. That fateful August it all came to a head.

If any of this sounds familiar, it is because it not only mirrors our Gospel reading this morning, but also because it tells the story of – any guesses? It is not exactly the story of the American Civil Rights Movement though this month we note the 53rd anniversary of Martin Luther King’s “I have a Dream Speech,” delivered from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial on August 28, 1963. Nor is this story about the effort to change the marriage laws in our country. Nor is it about the Vietnam War protests or the “Occupy Movement,” or the “Black Lives Movement,” or any recent political conventions or presidential candidate rallies. This story took place over a 70+ year period in American history and ended with the ratification of the 19th Amendment on August 18, 1920. Women could vote in all elections in America. Real change is very hard. Today, a woman runs for President a mere 96 years later. Real change is very, very slow.

Some of us might dislike our Gospel passage this morning because it seems counter to the teachings of Jesus. Part of our problem lies in the first sentence when Jesus says, “I came to bring fire to the earth.” For those of us raised on Smokey the Bear – “Only you can prevent forest fires,” we wince at the notion of Jesus bringing fire. This is a translation problem, a language problem, because Jesus is making reference to starting the fire in the bread oven, not torching the country-side. When a lover tells her beloved that her heart burns for him, she is not accusing him of giving her heart-burn. So, we can skip the notion that Jesus has pyromaniac tendencies.

But the division part is real. The radical message of Jesus, the Way of Jesus, will be divisive. It will find the fault lines in society and sheer off individuals and groups from one another but the Way of Jesus will replace those divisions with a new intentional community based on very different principles than traditional society. The Way of Jesus is a radical departure from business as usual. The power structure in God's kingdom is vastly different from the power structure that the followers of Jesus knew and the power structure in God's kingdom is vastly different from the power structure of America in the 1920's, the 1960's, and the power structure that exists today.

We lull ourselves with the images of the domesticated Jesus – the smiling nice Jesus who puts up with nonsense and replies to all insults with a sad and knowing smile. We gloss over the profound changes that will need to occur if we are to implement much of the Way of Jesus. We prattle on about sins of the flesh to distract everyone from the more pernicious sins of greed, violence, exclusion, prejudice, and hatred. We sing about the “sweet by and by,” and decline to talk about the wrongs that exist daily all around us. We promise the joys of heaven while we rob people of their very lives here on earth.

We think we have progressed so much since Old Testament days. We are so unlike those crude, rough people who lived before us. We don't practice torture, we don't force-feed people, we don't beat people into insensibility in our streets because we don't like what they think, we don't shoot people dead out of our fear, and we don't thrust people into isolation to break them down to obedience to our viewpoints. We are far too civilized to do such terrible things. No, we have long hidden those divisions among us by making them secret, by outsourcing such activities, and by blaming the victims as having brought it on themselves. That last accusation, by the way, has been and is now very popular. The people who opposed women voting used that very same argument, the people who opposed civil rights used that very same argument, and I suspect it will be used again about some other group wanting to be full members of the Body of Christ. Oh, hypocrisy is alive and well in our times.

We have come a long way, though. Much work has been done to bring the kingdom of God closer to fruition. But we have a long way to go. Injustice, prejudice, venality, corruption, sloth, and all manner of nefarious doings still plague our world. One of the first steps in continuing our journey toward a world based on God's view of creation, that human effort to have earth be more like heaven, is to interpret the present time honestly and fairly. To do that we must tell the truth in love. And that is never easy to do because our human egos get in the way and we struggle to tell the truth, especially when we don't come across too well in that telling.

To interpret the present time, we need to face the clear evidence about what is happening to the accumulation of wealth and power in the world. We need to face our complicity in racism, in sexism, and in class prejudice. We need to face the clear evidence about what is happening to such basic things as air and water. We need to face the clear evidence of pollution and the loss of habitat and animals – the decline of fish stocks, the decline of bee colonies, the ravages of disease on plants and animals. The list of things we need to face is long but face them we must. Denial and doing nothing will not make these problems go away – they will merely fester and grow worse.

But we are also armed with remarkable skills and abilities to improve things, to change the old order, to stop war, to end prejudice, to welcome strangers into our midst, to act in ways that build up the community for us all rather than just for some of us. We can take the fire of our beliefs and use it to warm the hearts of others. We can take the fire of our minds and illuminate the world, pushing back the darkness of ignorance and hate. We can bring the fire of love to melt the coldness of despair and change the world.

Or, as Langston Hughes wrote, we can just wonder;

What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up
Like a raisin in the sun?

Or fester like a sore--
And then run?

Does it stink like rotten meat?
Or crust and sugar over--
like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags
like a heavy load.

Or does it explode?

How shall we interpret the present time? Amen.