

Yr. C, Proper 15

Lk. 12:49-56

As much as we'd like there to be, there is no escaping into this sanctuary to avoid the tension in our lives this week in America. Nor is there any escaping the conflict in our Scripture readings for this morning. These readings are pertinent to what we are experiencing here and now. They are always pertinent. They are always applicable to our lives. That is why they are gospel.

Tension vibrates in the air, like a plumb line pulled taut, as words of judgment and conflict are spoken. The words of Jesus take our breath away: "Do you think I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division." Images of separation and hypocrisy among families and nations are not what we expect Jesus to bring. We struggle to remind ourselves that these warnings are an echo of the words of the prophet Micah [7:6]. They are based on the poignant voice of God beseeching us, "Oh my people, what have I done to you, how have I been a burden to you? Answer me. I brought you out of the land of Egypt. I rescued you from the house of slavery." And Micah responds: "[Yes] son insults father, daughter defies mother, daughter-in-law defies mother-in-law; a man's enemies are those of his own household." Yet again the prophet Isaiah asks, "What more was there to do for my vineyard that I have not done for it?" Followed by Jesus' asking, "Why do you not know how to interpret the present time?" He is applying those lessons from the past to the present situation of his listeners. It is Jesus as rabbi or teacher who is calling upon tradition to question us.

There is an old story about a rabbi who was asked by one of his pupils: "Why is it that you rabbis so often put your teaching in the form of a question?" To which the rabbi answered: "So what's wrong with a question?" Yes, Jesus was a Jewish rabbi, not a rabbi who was ordained following a course of study to codify written laws, but an oral interpreter of the present and teacher for that present.

Jesus as rabbi is depicted in Marc Chagall's painting entitled *The White Crucifixion* at the Art Institute of Chicago. Here Jesus is on a white cross wearing not a loincloth but the *tallith* of a devout and observant rabbi. A white tallith with black stripes according to the Orthodox Ashkenazic tradition is a fringed prayer shawl worn, as the Old Testament tells us, to remember all the commandments of God. In this painting we see, and in our lessons for today we hear, Jesus in his role as faithful Jewish interpreter of the past whose appearance asks us questions in the present.

But Jesus was also a new kind of prophet, one who was authorized to speak of the future on behalf of Another...with intensity. Jesus is standing as representative in the place of a disconsolate, heart-broken God listing the signs of spiritual conflict which will be brought about and overcome by fire.

Conflict. In the ancient world the building blocks of the cosmos were thought to be pairs of opposites, entities in conflict. Antithesis, it was said, was the magnetic force that held the world together. What's more, antinomy, or opposition, was a pattern of thought. We see that pattern of argument in

Micah [7:6]. But Jesus tells us that the old dichotomies do not go deep enough. Those opposites are too weak to deal with the new world that is coming into being. Jesus has something else in mind.

From the moment of Jesus' baptism, a spiritual, social, and cosmic battle for the allegiance of human freedom is declared. Satan, states Luke's version of the gospel plainly, Satan has been given control: The devil has led Jesus up and shown him all the kingdoms of the world saying, "To you I will give their glory...for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please" [Lk. 4:6]. Satan's control brings conflict to the center of our spirits, to the center of our society, to the center of our world...until an opportune time [Lk. 4:13].

Today begins that opportune time. Hear what Jesus has in mind: "I am come to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled." The NRSV translation is too tame. The Greek fairly thunders: "I am come to CAST fire upon humankind." I am come to cast...to cast...The word echoes throughout Luke and in the chambers of our mind. "Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and CAST into the fire" [Lk. 3:9]. "Then the devil took him to...the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, 'If you are the Son of God, CAST yourself down from here....'" [Lk. 4:9]. And there is the whisper of yet still more: "They CAST lots to divide his clothing" [Lk. 23:34].

Satan's control necessitates a second baptism for Jesus, and this baptism is a pitched battle for human freedom. This second baptism proclaims the death of the old cosmos, for this new baptism will split open the pillars of the universe. This baptism will be a flaming dagger...CAST into the heart of the earth, a dagger on whose hilt is nailed the Son of God. With this baptism, God begins to bring about a new creation, the fire lit on the cross, not the spiritual struggle his coming brings, but the onset of the messianic era.

None of us needs to have the signs of spiritual conflict listed for us. Just look at the newspaper. We are drowning in statistics of crisis and conflict. But the fire which Jesus brings will destroy that which destroys life. This fire will be stronger than our watery baptism. "I baptize you with water," said John the Baptist, "but he who is mightier than I is coming....He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire [Lk. 3:16]. The suggestion is that fire is a form of purification stronger than water, somehow more effective for salvation. Fire, like the Holy Spirit described as "tongues of fire" in Acts [2:3], cleanses and fits one for fellowship in the community of Christ. This fire is purification coupled with judgment, love that acknowledges division, a fire that marks mature discipleship, the fire that perfects what was begun with water. That kind of perfection is clearly dangerous. It cuts into all our previous assumptions, attitudes, and ambitions; but like moths drawn to a flame, we journey toward that light.

"Journey" is one of the principal metaphors for the Christian life. "The religious person," it has been said, "believes that life is about taking some sort of journey. The non-religious person believes there

is no journey to take.” So in acknowledging ourselves to be on a journey toward light and life, from fire toward fire with an invitation of promise, we confess that we are followers or disciples of Jesus. There is just one drawback: The word “disciple” and the word “discipline” come from the same root. You cannot have one without the other. Discipline is the “catch.” Like it or not, the authors of the Bible refer to discipline over and over; and “discipline” is not very popular in our world today.

For example, how many times have you heard the word “discipline” equated with force, not power as in the strength of discipleship, but power as in brute force or control? Disciplining the troops or disciplining the mob refers to force. But discipline is not the same as force. Self-discipline is not external compulsion. Nor is it the same as self control. No one is in control of his or her life. Fate takes strange turns. Self-discipline is a choice. True self-discipline is freedom. Self-discipline is learned through the conscious exercise of discipleship. It is an acquired skill. We are not born with self-discipline, it has to be learned; and it is absolutely necessary if we are to accomplish anything in life.

Ask any musician if he or she learned their art by means of sloppy practice habits; and they will tell you greatness is 5% talent and 95% hard work, hard work which they disciplined themselves to accomplish. At the National Music Camp at Interlochen, Michigan each summer, 150 teenagers crowd onto the bleachers of a small auditorium. They have been at camp four weeks and have learned their parts as soloists and chorus in an operetta. For several minutes there is pandemonium as they jostle for seats anywhere, but everywhere close to their friends, hollering across the room, and otherwise giving the appearance of following whatever impulse comes to mind.

Then the conductor taps his music stand: “Act 2, scene 3,” he says. The accompanist gives the opening chord, and beautiful harmonies fill the room. The stage director, an old man in baggy knickers, barks and marches his way through various positions on the stage, giving directions that to the casual observer would be obscure. Forty-five minutes later those 150 teenagers are singing and dancing, marching and gesturing as if performing on the opening night of a Broadway musical. The product of genius? No, the joy of effort and self discipline.

“Nothing let loose ever does anything creative. No horse ever gets anywhere until he is harnessed. No steam or gas ever drives anything until it is confined. No Niagara is ever turned into light and power until it is tunneled. No life ever grows until it is focused, dedicated, disciplined.” [Christian Advocate]

We do ourselves and our children a terrible disservice if we do not encourage and lead and teach ourselves and the next generation the art of self-discipline, for without discipline you cannot be a disciple. Without discipline, you and I find ourselves less than faithful and our lives less than full. If we equate division, judgment, and discipline with an unwelcome weight around our necks, there will be no geniuses in our generation, no prophets to challenge us with vision, no heroes for our children to emulate. Absent

models of discipleship, is it any wonder that many of our young people's heroes are Cat Woman, Spiderman, or countless others fed by selfish needs and revenge? Many of the stars of popular music, television, and film are for the most part individuals who are famous for being famous. We have substituted celebrity for character. God may still be in the business of salvation; but he calls those he saves disciples, and to wear that title requires discipline.

In his anthology, *A River Runs through It and other Stories*, Norman MacLean writes, "All good things---trout as well as eternal salvation---come by grace. And grace comes by art. And art does not come easy." Grace does not come easy. Grace is not cheap. Grace requires the sacrifice of His Son's life on the part of God and disciplined decisions on your part and mine. But the grace that comes from the fire forged by the Son of God lights the fires of life, giving us courage when faced with issues of ethics on the job, in the course of serious illness, in the loss of a career, a dream, a loved one.

When we see quiet, modest, disciplined people standing up for what is right, afire with conviction, refusing to let go of their faith in times of great stress, we have our great cloud of witnesses. They would be the first to admit their courage and character are not their own. Strength and super powers are no prerequisites to greatness. It is confidence they possess. Disciplined confidence, not in themselves, but in God. Confidence that the way has been cleared for their journey, that the fire has been kindled. They know that the will of God will never lead them where the grace of God cannot keep them.

If you and I feel ourselves caught by the desperate dichotomies of life, suffering from conflict anxiety, perhaps we feel this tension because we have forgotten who we are. We have forgotten that we are a people formed by a cosmos-shattering event. We are a holy people, not because of anything we have done, but because of who God is. We are a people set apart from the dichotomies, the conflicts, the competitions, of this world. We are set apart by the capacity for discrimination, the capacity to make judgments, the capacity for discipleship.

How the world will be shaped and governed---by the power of evil and death or by the power of God for life---will be determined in the light of discriminating fire: Evil will be exorcized by holiness. Just as a sword is tempered by fire, so shall we be made stronger by God's passion, that fire that was lit on the cross. Having been kindled, that fire draws us not from love but to love, not toward death but toward life.

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith...so that we with the others of his disciples may say, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith."

(The Rev.) Judith M. McDaniel, Ph.D.