

## 10<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost – Proper 15C

August 17, 2025

Isaiah 5:1-7

Psalms 80:1-2

8-18 Hebrews 11:29-12:2

Luke 12:49-56

### Harsh Mercy

*A sermon preached by The Rev. Dianne Andrews at  
St. Barnabas Episcopal Church, Bainbridge Island, WA.*



I would like to begin by sharing one of the preacher Barbara Brown Taylor's most classic stories. The setting is the dunes of Cumberland Island off the coast of southern Georgia. Barbara and her husband were on vacation... strolling the sandy dunes... taking in the peaceful scenery. As they walked, her husband was looking for fossilized shark teeth while Barbara was trying to avoid stepping on prickly sand spurs:

*They were both looking down at their feet when they suddenly came upon a huge loggerhead turtle that was just barely alive. The turtle's shell was too hot to touch. She was clearly in trouble. Barbara and her husband immediately surmised what had happened.*

*During the night the turtle had come ashore to lay her eggs. When she finished her task, she looked around for the brightest horizon to lead her back to the sea. But she had mistaken the lights on the mainland for the sky reflected in the ocean, and she had gone the wrong way. Now her flippers were buried in the sand, and she was stuck, half-baked in the noonday sun.*

*Taylor began to bury the turtle in cool sand while her husband ran to the nearest ranger station. She writes, "An hour later the turtle was on her back with tire chains around her front legs being dragged behind a park service Jeep back toward the ocean." The poor turtle's mouth was filled with sand and her head was so bent, that Taylor feared her neck would break. But it didn't. When they got to the edge of the water, the three undid the chains, gently flipped the turtle right side up, and "watched as she lay motionless in the surf."*

*But gradually, the waves began to bring her back to life. After a little while, as the waves lifted her up, she pushed off with her back legs and swam back "into the water that was her home." Taylor concludes: "Watching her swim slowly away after her nightmare ride though the dunes, I noted that it is sometimes hard to tell whether you are being killed or saved by the hands that turn your life upside down."<sup>1</sup>*

The images... in all of today's lessons... are startling and jarring. In Isaiah we hear: "I will remove its hedge... I will break down its wall... I will make it a waste...". In the Psalm we have more images of broken walls and unfruitful vines being burned like rubbish. In the letter to the Hebrews, the writer refers to the harrowing escape through the Red Sea that drowned Egyptian soldiers and their horses... and to the walls of Jericho that came tumbling down... followed by descriptions of imprisonment, suffering and torture. All this before we hear the encouraging words, "And let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us." Times were very tough and extremely challenging.

<sup>1</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor's story of the turtle as told by Sister Melannie Svoboda, SND  
<https://melanniesvobodasnd.org/the-turtle-story-a-reflection-for-holy-week-and-easter/>

And in Luke's message... we have a fired-up Jesus, the "Prince of Peace," who tells us that he has come to bring confrontation and division... as Jesus says to his listeners... in a rather gruff tone: "You hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of the earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present time?" The tame, sweet Jesus who I came to know as a child, is now giving advanced instruction to a more mature audience that seems to be in need... of being shaken awake and cracked open because a quieter approach wasn't getting through. The people needed to be saved. Our gospel lesson demands that we put aside, for the moment, Jesus the gentle shepherd, and to stand in the heat of a confrontational savior who says, "Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division!" Jesus' language is harsh and provocative. His words are anything but peaceful.

In today's gospel lesson we are being told, in no uncertain terms, to move beyond a quaint, comfortable faith... to roll up our sleeves... get beyond ourselves... and wrestle with the meaning of discipleship in our challenging times. Back when the gospel was written, towards the end of the first century, the persecution of Christians had already begun. If the Romans discovered even one Christian in a household, the whole family would be arrested. The harsh reality of the time was that... being a follower of Jesus often meant that turning away from one's family was less of a choice than a necessity. The price of following Jesus in the true way of love was... and still is... costly. Though times have changed, our faithfulness requires our full-on commitment. The path is one of yielding to God's way... of consenting to be continually reshaped and transformed... healed and called into ever-deeper, ever fuller life. Debbie Thomas says of Jesus:

*"His is a holistic, truth-telling, disinfecting peace. The kind of deep, life-changing peace that doesn't hesitate to break in order to mend, and cut rather than keep intact... And he will disrupt all dynamics in our relationships and ourselves and with each other that keep us from wholeness and holiness."*<sup>2</sup>

The idea that something needs to break before it mends... reminds me of a badly set bone that requires painful re-breaking and re-setting in order to heal properly. Though the author of Luke's gospel is most likely anonymous, it is fitting that the authorship is attributed to Luke the physician, a healer. If we were to remove all references to healing found in the gospels, the pages of the text would end up looking like Swiss cheese. Maybe we can say that the difficult message in today's gospel lesson comes less from Jesus the comforter and more from Jesus the healer who is seeking to shake a wounded, unresponsive people awake...

and back to life... that they might heal and grow into their full stature of discipleship. An image that came to me in the single most painful moment of my life. I saw a tall glass skyscraper slowly crumbling and collapsing into a dusty pile of rubble. The skyscraper was my life. Once the undoing had occurred, the reconstruction, the re-creation would begin. Ever-so-slowly, there would be healing and remaking... and there would be no going back.

*...it is sometimes hard to tell whether you are being killed or  
saved by the hands that turn your life upside down...*

The gospel invitation is to walk the path of new life... yielding to Jesus' way of love that seeks to make us whole. The path does not promise comfort. The path requires our attention, our full presence, our willingness... and our commitment... to follow Jesus wherever he leads, trusting that

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<sup>2</sup> Debbie Thomas, "Disturbing the Peace," Journey with Jesus, August 11, 2019:  
<https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/2305-disturbing-the-peace>

the journey will reveal new landscapes, open new chapters, and give us the gift of new life that is far more than we could possibly ask for or imagine.

I would like to end with a poem by Ted Loder from his book *Guerillas of Grace*, that I have adapted for us here today (*see original text on pg. 4*):

**Pry [Us] Off Dead Center** (*adapted*)

**Ted Loder** Guerrillas Of Grace: Prayers For The Battle

O persistent God,  
deliver us from assuming that your mercy is gentle.

Pressure us that we may grow more human,  
not through the lessening of our struggles,  
but through an expansion of them  
that will break us open and  
unbury our gifts.

Deepen our hurts  
until we learn to share them  
openly, and honestly.

Sharpen our fears  
until we name them  
and, with your help, release them  
and free us from fear's tyranny.

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Deliver us  
from simply going through the motions  
and wasting everything we have  
which is today,  
a chance, a choice, our creativity, your call.

O persistent God,  
let us know how much it all matters  
pry us off dead center  
so when we are moved inside to  
real tears  
or sighs  
or screams  
or smiles  
or dreams,

we will glimpse your magnificent dream  
and touch your deepest desire

that we be reconciled to you  
and to one another.

In Christ's holy and life-giving name...

*Amen...*

**Pry Me Off Dead Center** (*full text of the original poem*)

**Ted Loder** Guerrillas Of Grace: Prayers For The Battle

O persistent God,  
 deliver me from assuming your mercy is gentle.  
 Pressure me that I may grow more human,  
     not through the lessening of my struggles,  
     but through an expansion of them  
     that will undamn me  
     and unbury my gifts.

Deepen my hurt  
     until I learn to share it  
     and myself  
     openly,  
     and my needs honestly.

Sharpen my fears  
     until I name them  
     and release the power I have locked in them  
     and they in me.

Accentuate my confusion  
     until I shed those grandiose expectations  
     that divert me from the small, glad gifts  
     of the now and the here and the me.

Expose my shame wherever it shivers,  
     crouched behind the curtains of propriety,  
     until I can laugh at last  
     through my common frailties and failures,  
     laugh my way toward becoming whole.

Deliver me  
     from just going through the motions  
     and wasting everything I have  
     which is today,  
         a chance,  
             a choice,  
                 my creativity  
                 your call.

O persistent God,  
 let how much it all matters  
 pry me off dead center  
 so if I am moved inside  
     to tears  
         or sighs  
             or screams  
                 or smiles  
                     or dreams,

they will be real  
 and I will be in touch with who I am  
 and who you are  
 and who my sisters and brothers are.