

## A Divisive Word for a Divisive Time

*Luke 12: 49-56*

“I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what stress I am under until it is completed! Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division! From now on five in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three; they will be divided: father against son  
and son against father,  
mother against daughter  
and daughter against mother,  
mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law  
and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law.”

He also said to the crowds, “When you see a cloud rising in the west, you immediately say, ‘It is going to rain’; and so it happens. And when you see the south wind blowing, you say, ‘There will be scorching heat’; and it happens. You hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present time?”

One of the vows every minister takes during her/his ordination—whether it be as an elder, a deacon, or a pastor—is to uphold the peace, unity and purity of the church. We are not called to sow discord. Nor to stir up division. But to serve and love the people with intelligence, imagination and love. It seems Jesus missed the memo. Here he adamantly claims that he did not come to bring peace or unity to the earth, but has come to be a disruptor to the peace and a divider of households. What do we do with this off-putting, edgy side of Jesus?

As we ponder, let’s admit it doesn’t sound like the Jesus we know. A Jesus who claims to be the cause of our divisions does not line up with our image of who he is. After all, doesn’t Luke’s gospel begin with the promise that Jesus will “guide our feet by the way of peace?” When Jesus is born, don’t the angels sing that there is “Peace on earth?” Jesus himself says, “My peace I leave with you, my peace I give to you.” Not to mention in a divisive time like ours, when the flames of division are being fanned by our leaders, we do not need a Jesus who says, “I did not come to bring peace, but division!” It doesn’t sound like him, but there he is saying he has come to disrupt even the most sacred of relationships: pitting father against son; mother against daughter; mother-in-law against daughter-in-law—as if that relationship needed any extra strain! “I did not come to bring peace, but division,” he says. We admit, it doesn’t sound like the Jesus we know.

Except, Jesus is stressed and exhausted. On his way to Jerusalem, maybe he is tired of observing well-intended religious institutions who, in the name of keeping the peace, become bastions of indifference. Maybe he is tired of hearing false preachers twisting God’s word into excuses for oppression. Maybe he is weary of peace being defined as the absence of tension, rather than the presence of justice. And it is never our aim, but as followers of the poor Palestinian man of color,

sometimes we are beckoned to take stands that have the potential to be divisive for the sake of true peace. You may have heard last week that the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America became the first denomination to declare itself a sanctuary body who are committed to securing the safety of undocumented immigrants. It means that if an undocumented immigrant and their families are threatened by an I.C.E. raid, they can seek refuge in any ELCA Lutheran church. By becoming a sanctuary body, they have decided to use their power to disobey the law in order to protect the immigrant as God commands his people to do. Of course, we know some churches will not follow suit, and will find ways to leave the denomination; there will be some individuals who will leave the church table, seeking somewhere less messy. But at some point, we who follow Jesus must disrupt the peace for the sake of true peace.

The question: is now one of those times? “Read the signs,” Jesus says. Ask our children: what is coming when the wind shifts directions and a slate of gray clouds fold over each other as they roll in. What is coming when the air grows dense and musty as sheet lightning flickers. All the signs tell us: a thunderstorm is coming. In the Midwest where the land is flat, we were taught as young children that if the sky turned green and it sounded as if a train was barreling toward us, it meant it was time to go to the basement because there was a tornado coming. Just read the signs, Jesus says. As we just had the hottest global July on record; as we continue to have more mass shootings than number of days in the year. As programs that benefit the poor get cut. As officials want to tweak the language on the statue of liberty about welcoming the poor and tired for only those who can, “stand on their own two feet,” we wonder are these the signs Jesus is talking about? There will be times when we as a church read the signs and we cannot in good conscience stand idly by anymore. The question, of course: is now one of those times?

Recently there was a story about a couple of U.S. athletes who won the gold medal at the Pan Am games and used their platforms to make a political statement at separate ceremonies. One was an African American woman, the other: a white male. As the national anthem played and our stars and stripes rose above the others, the woman raised her fist in the air; the young man took a knee. Now, they had to sign a term of eligibility that promised they would not use the platform to make any political demonstrations because it is too divisive. As a result of their disobedience, their actions may have gotten them disqualified in participating at the 2020 Olympics. They put their life ambitions on the line. They may have compromised their team’s chances of winning. Some might say they were being too political and divisive, but they say they had no choice. They say they had to use their platform for the sake of human dignity.

There will be times when we will be called divisive too. When we will use our platform, not because we seek division, but because true peace is worth fighting for. Read the signs, says Jesus. Is now the time for us to become a place of sanctuary? Is now the time for us to take a disqualifying knee?