

Sermon Title: What Peace!
Scripture: Luke 12:49-56
Date & Location: August 18, 2019 Warren Wilson Presbyterian Church
Preacher: Grace Boyer

Our scripture lesson today is from the Gospel of Luke 12:49-56. While Jesus often tells his disciples not to be afraid, and blesses them with peace, this is not one of those passages. (*Read scripture.*)

- Luke 1:79 The priest Zechariah, father of John the Baptist, prophesies that Jesus “will give light ... to guide our feet into the way of peace.”
- Luke 2:14 The Angels come to the shepherds in the Christmas story, announcing Jesus’ birth by singing, “Glory to God in the highest ... and on earth peace.”
- Luke 7:50 As Jesus begins his ministry, he speaks to a woman that the religious leaders have scorned, and says to her “Your faith has saved you; go in peace.”
- Luke 8:48 Jesus heals a woman who has been sick for 12 years and says, “Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace.”
- Luke 10:5-6 Jesus sends out the 70 disciples in pairs into the Samaritan villages, and tells them to say “Peace to this house” whenever they enter a home and to share their peace with their host families.
- Luke 19:42 Jesus weeps over Jerusalem, and says, “If you, even you, had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace!”
- Luke 24:36 Jesus comes to the disciples after his resurrection, and the first words he says to them are “Peace be with you.”

Peace. Eirene in Greek. Shalom in Hebrew. A sense of wellness, wholeness, completeness. Jesus’ whole ministry in the Gospel of Luke is wrapped up in that word “peace”, and yet in our passage today he says, “Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division!” It is such a sharp departure. Is he contradicting himself? Is it just a bad day on the road for Jesus? What is behind this?

At this point in Luke, Jesus has turned his face toward Jerusalem, meaning he has begun his journey to his arrest, crucifixion, death, burial, and resurrection. The story we normally hear during Lent and Easter. Jesus has left his home county of Galilee, walked through the villages of Samaria, and come near to the capital city of Jerusalem, the place of Roman power and Religious power. And the crowds have grown around him so that they are in the thousands, trampling one another trying to get a piece of him (Luke 12:1).

Faced with this crowd pushing in around him, Jesus says, **Fire**. “I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled.” **Baptism**. “I have a baptism with which to be baptized,” Jesus says. Not a baptism for you and me, but for Jesus himself, a dunking submerging in the waters of duress that Jesus himself was about to go through in his arrest and crucifixion. “What stress, pressure, I am under until it is completed!” Jesus says, looking ahead to all he would face, and wanting to get it done, the way we might want an exam to be over, or a project hanging over our heads completed. Jesus is urgently caught up and absorbed in his mission and he no longer has time for polite chit chat on the road to Jerusalem.

A former colleague of mine in Florida, used to use the phrase, “A come to Jesus moment.” Have you ever heard it? I had never heard that phrase before him, though I have certainly heard it plenty since then. I think it comes originally from the old altar calls of making a decision to follow Jesus. But how it is now used by my friends is when you need to have a real, honest, frank discussion about something hard. A conflict, a decision, a behavior. You say, we need to have “a come to Jesus moment.”

In our passage, Jesus was having his own “come to Jesus moment” with the crowds pressed in around him. They were gathered around this famous teacher, feeding off the energy and excitement, seeing what they could get out of it, and out of him. And Jesus has to remind them that his message was not a joyride, it was urgent, and following him would have consequences.

Those consequences became evident in what happened to the early followers of Jesus after his death and resurrection. If a son, daughter, daughter-in-law, or spouse, decided to follow Jesus against the wishes of their family, they might find themselves kicked out of their households, and having to learn to rely on their faith family rather than their biological family. If a person who had long been a part of the local synagogue and village decided to follow Jesus, they might find themselves a social outcast in their own community. If a citizen under Roman rule decided to follow Jesus they might find themselves facing arrest, trial, jail, or death. In the book of Acts, the Epistles, and the writings of Church History we hear of the persecutions and trials that the early Christians faced. There are family divides, community divides. Jesus’ words to the crowds about bringing division were not so much about what he wanted or desired, but were a realistic description of what would indeed happen when people followed him. The very act of deciding to follow Jesus meant that divisions occurred. Because following him upset the status quo.

Speaking of upsetting the status quo, this past year I made a decision at one point to try to start getting up an hour earlier in the mornings. Thought it would be a good thing for me, the non-morning person that I am. But I didn’t think about the impact on my little family. Our two cats, who were used to my opening of the bedroom door meaning they were about to get their breakfast, began to set up a cacophony of sounds calling for their food. Sounds that disturbed my husband, who had grown used to his quiet private time early in the morning while I slept. Now, neither my husband nor my cats had any objections to my change of wake up time, but it changed the dynamics of our family. It shook up and disturbed the equilibrium so much that I had to give it up! I admit I wasn’t too upset about that.

But if such a small change in a family’s life can raise such a ruckus and unintentional opposition, imagine the reactions (intentional or unintentional) to the larger changes we make. Changes in faith and belief in one person in a family, or one person in a group of friends. Or if you change your style of speech, or what you eat or drink, or how you act, what you do, whatever it may be, if your friends are used to who you used to be, it shakes them up. If your family is used to your old patterns and you change them, it can shake up the system. So often in therapy, one person learns to change destructive patterns in their lives for more healthy patterns, and it either sets off a chain reaction in their families for good, or the influence of the family is so strong that it overcomes the newly healthy person’s resolve and they fall back to previous unhealthy patterns. People coming out of prison or rehab and moving back in with their friends and families see how hard it is to maintain their new lifestyle or commitments with their old friends. And people have to decide whether to get a new set of friends. This is the division that Jesus was getting at.

Jesus said, I have not come to bring peace but division. A division of the house. The phrase division of the assembly or division of the house means to take a vote in a legislative process. To state where you are on an issue by standing or sitting. To follow Jesus, the Jesus who went to the cross, meant to state your vote, to have a division of the house. And it would have consequences for his early followers.

Some of us know something about a division of the house. Whether it be in local politics, or congregations and presbytery votes. Some of us know something about a division of the house closer to home, within our own families or offices. The pain it brings. But also, sometimes the growth and honesty it brings.

What Jesus is speaking of in this text is that decision, that commitment to follow the message of God that can change your pathways. As Jesus approached Jerusalem, it was time for the disciples and for the crowds to shake themselves out. The ones that were serious about following this way of Christ as he headed to the cross, and those that had just wanted to be part of a parade. I have come not to bring peace but division. A division of the house.

So, what about this peace? What about this message of peace that Jesus preaches throughout the whole Gospel of Luke but not in this passage? What peace are we referring to? If it is Peace or calm based on keeping the status quo and not rocking the boat in a society where the Romans and the wealthy oppressed the people, and the poor barely made it, the widows and the orphans suffered, then “no”, Jesus didn’t come to bring that type of peace. If it is a Peace that is based on keeping your mouth shut, and keeping the status quo in families or communities by not speaking truth about injustice, then “no”, Jesus didn’t come to bring that type of peace.

The Peace that Jesus came to bring, the peace that Jesus preached in his very first sermon in Nazareth, his home town, was one in which good news is brought to the poor, the captives are released, the blind are healed, the oppressed are set free. It is a place where women like Mary and Martha are considered disciples just like the men; where Samaritan rivals are welcomed and even called good Samaritans; where people who were formerly on the margins of society because of illness or circumstance are treated with respect and helped to become healed, whole, honored, loved, even when it shakes up the status quo of the family and society. That is the type of peace Jesus came to bring. A peace that is about wholeness, honesty, authenticity, and the hard work of reconciliation and real recovery.

To embrace a kingdom-of-God-peace like that is like embracing Fire. Jesus said, “I have come to bring fire and how I wish it was already kindled in your hearts. I have come to bring a fire, a passion for the poor, the captive, the blind, the oppressed, the hurt. I have a mission and wish the fire was spreading in your hearts as well. A fire, a passion for the kingdom of God, and its type of Peace. This is what was burning within Jesus’ heart as he watched the crowds surround him on his journey to Jerusalem and the salvation and redemption his death would bring. He was speaking with the urgency of an activist or an emergency rescue squad coming into a crisis.

There is a story from the Desert Fathers & Mothers, Christians who in the early centuries went out into the Egyptian desert to be closer to God. A newer believer comes to a wise older father and asks, what else should I do beside my little prayer, my little devotion and fasting, my little habit/rule? Then the older man stands up and stretches out his hands toward heaven, and his fingers become like ten torches of flame. And he says: “Why not become fire?” Why not become fire, absorbed and consume by the mission of God, the passion and presence of God.

So, how do we do this? Jesus says, pay attention, look, see, watch for God as closely as a farmer does the weather. Whether the western clouds from the Mediterranean bring rain, Jesus says, or the southern winds from the desert bring scorching hot air. Pay attention. See God at work around us, at work in this present time. For the time is always now, always here for the type of Peace and wholeness that the kingdom of God offers.