

Tenth Sunday after Pentecost/August 18, 2019

Isaiah 5:1-7; Psalm 80; Luke 12:49-56;

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"And Forgive Us . . . As We Forgive . . ."

Where do we begin in trying to address these words of Jesus from the gospel of Luke? *"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!**"*

How can we reconcile this Jesus with the one Luke throughout his gospel, tells us is the one who is indeed to be the bearer of peace to the world? In the beginning of the gospel, we hear Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, prophecy about this one his son is to prepare the way for, saying of him, he will be the one: *"to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the ways of peace."* (1:79). And at the end of his gospel, as he appears to them in his resurrected form, we hear Jesus greet his astonished disciples, with the words, *"Peace be to you!"* (24:36).

And did he not bless those he healed with peace (7:50, 8:48) and tell his disciples to bring greetings of peace as they went out to minister to the people, proclaiming the good news of God's realm (10:5-6)? And what about that most famous of parables, the one about the son who after severing his ties with his father and family to strike out on his own, loses all he has and returns to work as a slave for his father, but is accepted with open arms and a party to boot! Was not the point of that story to engender reconciliation and peace where there was separation and division?

It seems we have entered here in Luke, a new and different phase in the Jesus story. The division Jesus speaks of is real. This is no mistake in the recording of his message. Luke didn't somehow just misunderstand what Jesus was trying to say. For those who think Jesus was all just about love and peace and being kind and nice, this passage is especially for you.

However, we need to be clear, this is not about those times when we simply disagree or hold a different opinion about something with those around us. In a recent "Daily Devotional" put out by the UCC, Rev. John Edgerton of Oak Park, Illinois, says a good way to start an argument in a local church is to bring up how best to sing the Doxology. Should we use the tune "Old Hundredth" or sing it to "Lasst Uns Erfreuen"? Discussions on such matters in churches, as many of us know all too well, can become very divisive and upsetting. Edgerton then ends with a prayer, using the words of the Doxology, *"Praise God from whom all blessings flow! Praise God all creatures here below! Praise God above, you heavenly host! Creator, Christ and Holy Ghost!* and then says, *"We hope, O God, that you enjoyed how many different ways we just sang that."* And I realized that in my mind, I had thought of the tune we would use at summer camp, *"Hernando's Hideaway"* and how that would really get some people discombobulated!

But all joking aside, the love-bringing, peace-making Jesus of Luke's gospel here, has turned deadly serious. In this whole section, we hear Jesus, like the prophet Isaiah of old, condemning the religious elite, the Pharisees and the lawyers for their attention to their religious practices and rituals but careless of the poor and needy. He calls them *"fools"* and *"hypocrites."* (11:40, 12:1). He has reached the point in his journey when he is drawing near to Jerusalem, to

the place of his forthcoming death, and he needs to make his message clear. *When you follow in my way, there will be consequences! The status quo will no longer be acceptable or tolerated. You will have to make decisions that will be hard and painful and will require your full allegiance to me and to the way of the realm of God's love.*

It is no accident that Jesus uses images of the family unit to talk about the division that is to be expected when people follow in his way. The family was a microcosm of the wider social fabric and still is. What affected the family unit, certainly would affect all of society. Committing to the way of the gospel, would require one's full self and might put one up against those who were close, whether family or friend. Recall that once when his family came looking for him, he said, *"My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it."* (Luke 8:21). Really challenging and changing the concept of *family* in his time.

So, are we to understand that Jesus wants and desires division? Are we supposed to seek stands on issues that divide us and separate us from one another? When our leaders endorse ideas that aim to set one group of people against another, should we be condoning this? When people use division as a tactic to manipulate and turn us into "us" and "them", should we follow along? It certainly feels like this is what is happening these days in our own nation, as well as around the world. And if we aren't stoking the fires of division well enough ourselves, it seems the Russians or others, our adversaries on the world scene, will be happy to assist us in it!

Jesus knew that for God's realm to be realized, there must be unity within the body. *"Every kingdom divided against itself is laid waste, and a divided household falls."* (Lk. 11:17). And he also said, *"He who is not with me is against me, and he who does not gather with me scatters."* (Lk. 11:23). But he also said, and we in the United Church of Christ lift up these words as our motto: *"I do not pray for these only, but also for those who believe in me through their word, **that they may all be one.**"* (John 17:21).

Jesus' prayer, and ultimate desire was that the gospel be a unifying and uniting power in the world. But not solely for the sake of **unity**. People can be united for many reasons or causes, and many of them can be harmful, dangerous and downright evil. History has made that clear. But the unity Christ seeks is rather for the sake of **love**, which by my definition is that which brings us together, unifies us through the powers of empathy, self-giving and mercy, and empowers us to becoming the whole people God intends us to be.

In contemplating this passage this week, I couldn't help but think about Abraham Lincoln. I have recently been watching the PBS episodes of Ken Burns "The Civil War." I am so struck by Lincoln's amazing ability to stand as if with a foot on each side of the divide of our country's civil war. In his first inaugural address, as the spire of war loomed over the country, Lincoln wrote these words: *"In your hands, my dissatisfied fellow-countrymen, and not in mine, is the momentous issue of civil war. The Government will not assail you. You can have no conflict without being yourselves the aggressors. You have no oath registered in heaven to destroy the Government, while I shall have the most solemn one to "preserve, protect and defend it." I am loath to close. **We are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies.** Though passion may have strained it must not break our bonds of affection."* Though at great odds with those of the southern states that wished to secede, Lincoln continues to regard them as **"friends."** *"We must not be enemies"* he insists as he seeks to find a way to avoid division. None at that time, on either side, had any idea of how terrible and costly the approaching war would wound

and decimate our nation. Yet, only through the engagement of that war, could the end of slavery eventually become the cause, the **righteous cause**, for which union would be sought.

We are called as Christians to seek **unity** with one another, with all others. Yet we are also called to stand up for the ideals and values that the gospel proclaims: mercy, justice, acceptance, equality, compassion, truth, kindness, love.

In the prayer he taught his disciples, Jesus raised those ideals along with another: **"Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors."** (Matt. 6:12) We cannot express these ideals of the gospel unless we set ourselves on equal footing with one another. **Forgiveness** does that by releasing one person from the "debt" owed another, whether financial, emotional, or spiritual.

In his book, *The Greatest Prayer*, John Dominic Crossan explains the close relationship between "debt" and "debt slavery." That if a person could not pay off a debt, they could be enslaved to pay it off. Throughout the ancient world, laws were established that gave restrictions to the length and duration which slaves could be held. Listen to this passage from Deuteronomy (15:12-15, 18): *"If a member of your community, whether a Hebrew man or a Hebrew woman, is sold to you and works for you six years, in the seventh year you shall set that person free. And when you send a male slave out from you a free person, you shall not send him out empty handed. Provide liberally out of your flock, your threshing floor, and your wine press, thus giving him some of the bounty with which the Lord your God has blessed you. Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God redeemed you; for this reason I lay this command upon you today. Do not consider it a hardship when you send them out from you free persons, because for six years they have given you services worth [twice] the wages of hired laborers; and the Lord your God will bless you in all that you do."*

Regarding Jesus prayer, *"Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors"* Crossan states that this **"should be taken literally and not metaphorically."** (p. 154). Essentially, what Jesus directs his followers to do, is to release one another from whatever indebtedness, whatever slavery binds them, in whatever ways we have **sinned** or **trespassed** against them. That must be our prayer. In so doing, we also will be released from those things, those desires, drives, or impulses to control that might enslave us.

So, as we strive to live the lives Christ calls us to, to seek justice, to aid the weak, the poor, the homeless, the stranger in our midst, to empower the powerless, to fight hatred and prejudice, stop violence, and seek to bring peace into our world, we are also called to mend the divisions that form between us. **It is an extremely difficult calling**, especially in these times when we are so polarized on so many levels. But the seeking of **unity grounded in love** is also a **righteous cause** that we must pursue if we are to claim Christ's gospel.

So I turn once again to the wisdom of Abraham Lincoln, and share these words from his Second Inaugural Address (March 4, 1865):

"With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in, to bind up the nation's wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and his orphan, to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations." Amen.