

## Proper 15 Yr C, **The Jesus of Fire and Division**

### **The Jesus of Fire and Division**

Friends, in hearing today's scripture reading, you and I are likely to agree with scriptural commentator, Melissa Bane<sup>\*</sup>, in saying, division isn't something we're all that crazy about. Especially right now, in this incredibly divisive presidential election season. You and I want us all to be harmonious and unified over the things that are really important, and not worry too much about the things that aren't.

Maybe everyone feels that way (except for the few who live for division and controversy). The problem is, of course, that we sometimes disagree on the really important things.

That may be what Jesus has in mind in asking,

***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...*** [from Luke 12]

I'm guessing the disciples must be pretty confused by this. ...Straight up, right in their face, Jesus asks, "***Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth?***"

...“Well, Yes, actually!” many of us might be say!

Jesus said a lot of things about peace. Some of us love to talk-up and preach about peace and unity as though they were the only principles that matter. In the way that some talk-up “law and order” as though was the only value that mattered.

Jesus is making an important point here. Yes, peace is important. But, so is justice. Real peace brings justice. The famous *Pax Romana* (Roman Peace) of Jesus' time wasn't true peace at all. Though it may have embodied one of the signs of peace—the absence of war, as Martin Luther King, Jr., noted, wasn't a positive peace, it was a “negative peace”!

In a negative peace – enforced to preserve a perverse kind of peace, many people and cultural groups are oppressed, kept from full cultural expression, forced to use a language not theirs, prohibited from following some of their own religious practices.

That isn't peace. And it certainly isn't justice.

When we promote real justice, we may anger the powers that be – among these those holding the power of rule-making, the courts, the police, the pulpit – secular and religious people, elite and ordinary people – gate-keepers. When we seek liberty and justice for all as a religious practice, we may find ourselves creating division. Jesus certainly found that to be true.

Who among our spiritual ancestors secured justice without experiencing violent push-back and consequent division from those whose interests could not allow for true justice? Think John Calvin or Martin Luther.

My spiritual ancestors knew this to be true – Mahatma Gandhi, Fredrick Douglass, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Martin Luther King, Jr., Cesar Chaves – these and others. Justice-seeking is opposed!

The decision for justice in the face of injustice means division. The word “decision” means to cut a part. To decide for justice is to decide against injustice. Not to decide is to accept the status quo. Consider for whom accepting the status quo is acceptable, for whom it is not?

Jesus' call to ministry expressed shortly before his going to Jerusalem, involved “decision.” Jesus chose to go to Jerusalem, knowing full well that his enemies hated his ministry and message. All of Jesus' life as we see it played out in the gospel is about ushering in the kingdom of God. Toward that end, Jesus is afire, doing his utmost to challenge, provoke, turn conventions upside down and downside up, so that oppressive systems of relationships would end; so that *just* social arrangements reflecting God's ideal might come to reality. ...!.Not far off into the future. ...But here and now!

Jesus was bent toward realizing a world structured on justice, mercy and compassion, where burdens were lifted and the oppressed set free – a commonwealth of peace and justice. Bringing such a world about, meant fire and division.

We who would truly desire the kingdom of God, the commonwealth of peace and justice, must, also, be on fire.

Jesus' powerful words may be heard or felt by some of us as chilling, frightening, or provocative. But if so, why? What of our US history makes this so? What was the context in which Jesus said these words? Was it not in the context of social inequality, of peasant farmers being dispossessed of their land, of debt servitude and enslavement, of rampant injustices of all kinds from the Roman colonial army and from Judean ruling classes and religious elite, and, of course, from the consequent

social up-risings the oppression provoked. In what ways does that history mirror our own? Do we recognize ourselves and our own US history in the historical context of Jesus?

In that context and in our own, Jesus' words of "fire" and "division" are understandable. Jesus burned to do something about what he saw and knew was not God's purpose.

Taking the gospel seriously, changes everything:  
***"I have come to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled."***  
The words **Call** and **Demand**.

Clouds of witnesses, before us, answered the call and met the demand. Among these, we remember those who marched with Dr. Martin Luther King.

In his letter from a Birmingham Jail, Dr. King, expresses gratitude for those white brothers and sisters who grasped the meaning of that social revolution and committed themselves to it.

King commends them for recognizing the urgency of that moment, their sensing the need for powerful "action," antidotes to combat the disease of segregation. That action they gave to the fullest.

By bus-loads, they went to the south to march with King, some stayed to organize and build resistance to racial oppression and to lay foundations for social justice.

Some left secure congregations to walk the streets of Alabama and Georgia with King – going down the highways of the South on tortuous rides for freedom. Yes, they went to jail with him.

Some were dismissed from their churches, lost the support of their bishops and fellow ministers. Some were killed. All acted in the faith that right defeated is stronger than evil triumphant.

Many of us today do not know or remember that Martin Luther King and these protesters against injustice were considered agitators and trouble makers. Their behavior disrupted presumed entitlement, social patterns considered normal and even God-given. What King and followers did disturbed people, angered them, challenging the ways they were in the world as privileged people. ...To put it mildly, King and his followers were not universally loved.

There is no question here that seeking justice implies fire and division.

Indeed, in this morning's gospel we find Jesus going into the streets of Jerusalem in full knowledge that his justice-seeking ministry on behalf of the "least of these" will mean division among many, persecution for his followers, and crucifixion for himself.

If this is our gospel history, tell me, then ..., why it is so difficult to talk about a Jesus of "fire" and "division"?

Some congregations could never find themselves to feel the fire or risk the division. What does it take, what demand, of those who do? ...Honesty. Vulnerability. Willing to accept the pain and grief from what is learned as they question what convention says ... they must NOT question. It takes ... opening closed doors. Breaking silence. Speaking truth. And, it takes welcoming the discomfort and struggle to see and understand from a different perspective. The kingdom perspective.

You know our Cherokee Park United history of the last 30 years! Have we here at Cherokee Park United Church found a way to engage in conversations that shook us up? Discomforting and disorienting us? Requiring reexamination as we questioned long-standing, well-established traditions about gender, belief, and race? Yes!

Did such conversations cause some division in sentiment and relationships? Yes! Of course, they did?

What happened as result of the divisions? Did not the decisions behind the divisions make us a stronger congregation? ...Clearer about who we were and what we needed to be about as committed followers of Jesus? Did it not alter the way we do worship? Select music? Deliver our sermons? Joyfully celebrate our diverse? Image the ways we see Jesus as historically and culturally specific, and yet, somehow, universally accessible? Yes! Yes! Are we not the better for it?

As a congregation, we aspire to be, disciples of Jesus, expressing this in practices of inclusive welcome and abundant hospitality. In our worship service we confess our sins – personal and collective; in our sermons we address the true circumstances of our community, society and world in light of the life and teachings of Jesus.

Through today's gospel we grapple with "fire" and "division". This gospel calls us to a life regulated by mercy, compassion and justice. This gospel asks us to *interpret* the meaning of our times, cautions us not to be hypocrites, demands honest evaluation and openness to understand and respond to what we see.

The kingdom of God is not yet realized. We have much work yet to do.

We are asked through this gospel to be responsible for our part in creating the kingdom of God. It lays on us the responsibility of inquiring into the true nature of the injustice about us, to question what part *we* play in allowing injustice to remain through silence or fear.

We are challenged today to engage in the ministry of Jesus. Jesus' ministry reconciles what is with what ought to be and must be. For the disciple of Jesus, the kingdom – the commonwealth of God, must be. The work to bring that about, inevitably, invites conflict and division between those who work for it and those who work against it.

Not everyone welcomes the kingdom of God. In understanding something of what it is and how and why it *is* opposed, are *we* able to welcome it? Have *we* decided that it must be the focal point of how we live in the world?

Jesus calls us to a decision point.

When we do the work of living into the commonwealth of God, be assured, division begins. In that moment, let us also be assured, the truth and reality of the gospel has begun to break in among us.

May God's kingdom come! ...!.. Amen.

\* <https://melissabanesevier.wordpress.com/2016/08/08/the-radical-nature-of-the-gospel/>