



## 'Good News?'

Lectionary 20 – Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost  
8:30 & 10:45 am, August 14, 2016  
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[Jeremiah 23:23-29](#); [Hebrews 11:29-12:2](#);  
[Luke 12:49-56](#)

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. AMEN.

I read words from a scholar about our Gospel reading this week who usually asks two questions when studying a scripture lesson: Is there Law in the reading? (that moment when we are convicted of our sin or commanded to be obedient to God in a challenging way.) Then he asks: Is there Gospel (good news) in the reading? (that moment when we experience God's grace and mercy.) Well, this week, regarding this particular reading from Luke the scholar answered YES to the first question (Is there Law here?) and a resounding NO to the second question (Is there good news here?)

Yep. Pretty much sums it up. Luke 12:49-56 is one of those texts about which folks scratch their heads and wonder. Including pastors. It's one of those texts where Jesus says or does something which seems so contrary to everything else he is about. This lesson brings about an unsettling discomfort. Let's rank this lesson about division, about members of families being divided against one another, right up there with the story of Jesus cursing the fig tree (which was just standing there in the ground outside Jerusalem, minding its own business). Or the story of Jesus cracking a whip and throwing the moneychangers and other respectable businesspeople from the courtyard of the Temple.

In many ways, we have become so comfortable with the soft and gentle Jesus, the compassionate one who takes children in his arms, and feeds the multitude, and touches a leper to make him whole again, that when we witness that other side of Jesus, we are flummoxed. We aren't certain we like that other side of Jesus, who seems so angry, so driven, so grimly prophetic.

We long for the Prince of Peace, the One of whom the angels sang in the skies over Bethlehem: "Glory to God in the highest, and peace, goodwill to all!" We hunger for God's kingdom of Shalom where the lion lies down with the lamb. We hope for a creation restored where we really can all get along. So naturally we flinch at words like this: "Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division!" This is good news? If this is the good news, I don't want to hear the bad news.

Because we are living in a world already filled with bad news. For us broken and sinful human beings, division is the order of the day. That division is along familial, communal, political, ethnic, racial, religious, and national lines. We are already "us" and "them." So when we read these words—"From now on five in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three..."—we know all about it. Heck, we

have 86 days of bitter campaigning to look forward to in this presidential election. Oh, surely we are divided in this world. Democrats and Republicans. Immigrants and citizens. Police officers and African-Americans. Muslims and Christians.

Why is it that Jesus promises us more? More division? And, in fact, says he is the one who will bring it?

I suppose that before we can wrestle with that concept, we ought to see how Jesus introduces it. Our reading from Luke opens up with a Jesus who senses the urgency in his mission here on earth, wishing it were already accomplished. Jesus says he came to bring fire, wishing it were already kindled. You could interpret that as the fire as God's refining fire. Jesus Christ, the anointed one of God, has come to this earth to change us, to refine us like a metal is refined to its purest through heat. And Jesus declares he is straining ever forward toward his baptism (hey, but didn't that happen already with water in the river Jordan at the beginning of our Gospel?). Only he's referring again to his mission, to the baptism of his death on the cross.

So this is not Jesus standing above the fray, unaffected by the chaos and watching creation implode upon itself. Nor is this Jesus swooping in and wreaking havoc upon the world. Rather, this is Jesus taking the havoc upon himself in a world **already** divided. This is Jesus, who doesn't come to us dressed in armor and wielding weapons, but instead hangs on a cross, stripped and bloody, as the sign of God's reign. This is Jesus giving all of himself to creation in order to transform it. That's where Jesus begins.

So where is this division Jesus says he will bring with him? It will be the consequence of his life given for the world. Jesus comes, proclaiming the kingdom of God is at hand, and it simply will not jive with the present status quo. His kingdom calls for forgiveness, while in our world we eagerly seek revenge. His kingdom calls for humility, while in our world we clamor constantly for attention. His kingdom calls for generosity, while in our world we hold tight to our possessions and yearn for more. His kingdom calls for us to love unconditionally, while in our world we are miserly with our hearts, insisting that others do something first to deserve our love.

If Jesus brings division, it is because his demands on us create a cognitive dissonance within ourselves. We may be much like that "Push Me Pull You" llama from the story of Dr. Doolittle. Follow Jesus? Or follow our own desires? We are torn between our own selfishness and Jesus' call to walk his path, between the status quo of our lives and the new kingdom life where real peace can be found. We are divided in ourselves.

And if Jesus brings division, it is because he brings to our whole world a radical understanding of what God's kingdom is—a place where power is realized in vulnerability, and gaining life is found in losing ourselves, and being first comes from becoming last—well, that creates a cognitive dissonance in our world, because the present status quo says power and fame and being first are only attainable when you grab it all for yourself at the expense of your neighbor. So, yes, Jesus will bring division as you and I and all humanity grapple with this new way Jesus offers. For it is not our nature to take that selfless path. His path will be rejected and opposed all the time, often by you and me!

Luke's audience knew the reality of this division. They were two generations beyond the earthly Jesus, struggling to remain cohesive as the Church, waiting for Jesus' return that seemed delayed, and existing under oppression as a minority religion. Oh, yes, Luke's readers knew division. So Luke simply reminded them it should not come as a surprise that life was not all puppy dogs and rainbows, but required a commitment to the Lord of creation in the face of division.

Good news? Well, not exactly—at least not in how we often seem to define that phrase.

So what are **we** to be about, as Jesus' Church nearly 2,000 years later? What are we to be about in the face of a divided world and in the recognition of our own internal divisions as we try to live out our faith?

Well, it is fitting we are beginning the track and field portion of the Olympics now. In fact, I believe this morning the women's marathon was taking place. You see, in our passage from the letter to the Hebrews today, the writer uses the image of a runner, straining forward to the finish line. And that runner is surrounded by "so great a cloud of witnesses." Imagine, say, a marathon runner, after all those miles, entering the stadium, cheered on and encouraged by the throng of folks in the stands. And then, that marathon runner keeps going on the path before them that leads to the finish line, not distracted or weighed down by those things that might trip them up.

And then, you know what the writer of the letter to the Hebrews says? That the runner's eyes should be kept on the One who ran the race before them—Jesus Christ—the pioneer and perfecter of our faith who endured the cross and its shame and now reigns victorious.

You and I are this marathon runner, encouraged by those around us and those who have gone before us. You and I have received God's gracious promises, been strengthened by God's Spirit, and commissioned to go out and serve in God's name. So that's we are to do. We keep running, and we look to Jesus who leads the way. **AMEN.**

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