

***Peace Will Not Be Easy***  
**A Sermon on Luke 12:49-56**  
**Proper 15**  
**August 18, 2019**

**Introduction**

This is a different side of Jesus from what we usually see. He sounds more like John the Baptist. He wants to cast fire on the earth and bring division not peace.

We tend to read stories about Jesus through the lens of our personal beliefs. We prefer Jesus the healer and Jesus the reconciler. Jesus is not judgmental. Jesus is non-violent.

Today's story is gray and black in the color-coding scheme of the Jesus Seminar. That means that these words most likely come from the evangelist and his community, not from the historical Jesus.

This story also appears in the Gospel of Matthew and in the Gospel of Thomas. Even if this story doesn't come from the historical Jesus, it was floating around in the tradition. Some of the earliest followers of Jesus thought it was faithful to his teaching.

I am thankful to the lectionary for forcing us to cover this text. It may stretch our understanding of Jesus and the kingdom.

**First Move: Preparing for the Kingdom**

"I came to cast fire on the earth." Fire can have two meanings: judgment and purification. It could be both. Gehenna was a valley outside Jerusalem. In ancient Israel the kings of Judah offered child sacrifice by fire there. Gehenna came to be known as a place where evil people were consumed by fire; it was a place of judgment by fire. Fire also purifies things. We put fire under a pot of water to boil away the impurities and make it safe to drink. Isaiah says, "Woe is me. I am a man of unclean lips." An angel touches a hot coal to his lips to purify his mouth so that he can deliver the word of God to the people.

Jesus talks about the kingdom of God drawing near, but first he must purify the land. Sometimes we underestimate the significance of the resurrection. The resurrection is a transformation of people and society. It is a new heaven and a new earth. Things will be different in the kingdom of God. We can't go on committing the

same old sins. The sins, especially systemic sins, need to be exposed by bringing them to light.

Jesus himself must be consumed by fire. The baptism he refers to means his death. The Greek word βαπτίζω was appropriated by the followers of John the Baptist to mean the ritual of dipping people in the river to purify them of their sins. In secular Greek βαπτίζω means to dip or plunge something into water. We lose the symbolism by sprinkling holy water on infants. Baptism is an image of death. New life is symbolized by rising up out of the water.

Jesus says he came to bring division not peace. The Gospel of Matthew says he came to bring a sword not peace. The image of Jesus with a sword unsettles us. Jesus is supposed to be the Prince of Peace.

The kingdom divides people. People who are content with the status quo will oppose the kingdom. First-century Judeans were afraid that the Jesus movement would bring the Romans down upon all Judeans. When the apostle Paul was persecuting the followers of Jesus, it was because he was afraid that the Romans would punish all the Judeans for talking about a new kingdom and for saying that the true son of God was Jesus not Caesar.

Luke has been stressing the urgency of deciding. Last week he said that people should keep their loins girded and their lamps burning. Act as if the kingdom has already arrived.

The kingdom of God is a radical thing. It's going to change the way people live. Jesus says he is creating a new family. Whoever does the will of God is my mother and my brother and my sister.

People respond differently to the prophetic message that Jesus brings. Family members who are left behind will not be happy about it. Families will be divided, fathers against sons, mothers against daughters, mother-in-law against daughter-in-law.

Jesus rebukes the crowd. They are mostly peasant farmers. They know that rain is coming when they see a cloud forming in the west over the Mediterranean Sea. They know that south winds will bring scorching heat off the desert. Yet they cannot read the signs of the times. Bob Dylan captured this thought in *Subterranean Homesick Blues*, a protest song from the 1960s. "You don't need a weatherman to know which way the wind blows."

## **Second Move: Confronting Divisive Issues in Church**

People resist the kingdom today for different reasons. People in church resist change. Nancy Pittman was one of my professors in seminary; she used to be the senior minister at First Christian Church of Tahlequah. She told us in a preaching class that she took three years to move communion from the middle of the worship service to the end of the service. It took me about three years to phase in communion by intinction instead of communion by passing the trays with wafers and juice cups. Many church people are upset and confused by the change all around them in society and come to church looking for stability. They resist change, especially in church. Imagine what would happen if we tried to take away Happy Dollars as part of our service.

People in church also like to avoid controversy and conflict. A lot of churches avoid addressing the big social issues in church: the Iraq war, the Viet Nam war, the civil rights movement, ordination of gay ministers, gay marriage, immigrants and refugees. The problems don't go away. They percolate below the surface, then simmer and explode.

The church tends to avoid the important things and talk about the weather instead. It's less divisive to talk about the personal and avoid the social. It is a devastating compromise. The church avoids talking about things that matter. The church is no longer relevant to what is happening in people's lives.

I would like to take the rest of our time today talking about a problem that has reared its ugly head: racism. It never went away, but it is back out in the open now.

One of founding principles of our movement is the unity of all Christians. We understand unity as meaning that we participate in the ecumenical movement and in the interfaith dialogue. What about the ethnic minorities in our own churches? I don't believe that the church has any witness to offer about unity unless it has dealt with racism and reconciliation in the church.

Today I want to talk about racism and reconciliation in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). The General Board of our denomination in 1996 approved the formation of a church-wide process to discern the nature of racism in North America and to develop ways of helping congregations address racism. Two years later the General Board approved a Pro Reconciliation Anti Racism initiative that was based on the following premises:

1. Racism is a spiritual and theological dilemma as well as a social evil;

2. Racist practice exists throughout the life of the church and needs to be addressed. The church needs to get its own “house” in order even as it looks toward being a transformational agent in the larger world; and
3. Racism is a systemic problem with historical root causes.

Disciples ministers in Oklahoma are required to attend a workshop every three years in Pro Reconciliation Anti Racism training to maintain standing. Mary and I attended our first workshop Tuesday at Southern Hills CC.

I was a little disappointed in the workshop because it only addressed broader issues in the culture; there was nothing in it that was tailored to racism and reconciliation in our churches.

The Biblical notion of reconciliation comes from the Greek word ἀλλάσσω. The root word is ἀλλός, which means *other*. It means to change the other or to exchange one thing for another. Reconciliation involves a change in the relationship between God and a human or between one human and another human. It assumes there has been a breakdown in the relationship, but now there has been a change from a state of enmity and division to one of harmony and fellowship.

The first step in reconciliation in the church is to form relationships. Get to know the other, so that they are no longer the other. We see the other as human. We can't have real peace until we have a real relationship.

### **Third Move: Becoming Pro Reconciling Anti Racism**

Ethnic minorities are a growing part of our denomination. The ministries for Asian Americans and Latinos have only really taken off in the last 40 years. African Americans have been part of the movement from the beginning.

Disciples today have 2,000 congregations in the United States, of which 435 are African American, 120 are Latino or bilingual, and 110 are Asian American. So roughly 30% of Disciples churches are ethnic minorities. And we can't think of Latino American and Asian American Disciples as homogenous groups. About half of the 110 congregations in North American Pacific/Asian Disciples (NAPAD) are Korean churches. There also are Filipino, Chinese, Samoan, Indonesian, Zo and Chuukese congregations. There is a Zo congregation in Tulsa. Latino congregations can be primarily Mexican, Puerto Rican or Guatemalan. These are not monolithic cultures.

Michael Kinnamon and Jan Linn, who wrote *Disciples* that we are reading on Wednesday nights, gave a workshop on the book at General Assembly in July and asked the leaders of these three ethnic ministries to review the argument in their book and discuss whether it is consistent with their perspective of Disciples tradition and their vision of Disciples identity and mission in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Chung Seong Kim, Executive Pastor for NAPAD, said that he didn't like being called an ethnic minority. He prefers to simply be called a Disciple. He also dislikes being asked whether he is a real Disciple.

These three ministries have their own assemblies every other year. Next year they will have an assembly together in Fort Worth. They want to start doing things together. They have many common issues.

Mary asked them about inviting Alliance Q Disciples and Native American Disciples to their assembly. They said they would be welcome, but they weren't inclined to add them as a group unless they asked.

That is one problem we face in bringing different ethnic groups together in church. Members of the ethnic groups tend to be more conservative theologically. They are less accepting of LGBT folks and women in ministry.

I thought we had a wonderful mix of people here for my tenth anniversary service two years ago. George Young preached; he was my mentor in seminary. We had black, white, Asian, Native, gay, straight, young, old. When we started the New Beginnings process last year, I told Craig Walls with Board of Church Extension that I wanted to move toward becoming a fusion church. Craig said that sounds great, but different ethnic groups have different styles of worship, different music and different cultures. It is hard to bring that all together.

There is also the cultural piece. One of my professors in seminary, John Thomas, said he thought he would be giving up part of his culture unless he went to an African American congregation. Celebration of culture is part of what churches do.

I asked the panelists at General Assembly whether they thought fusion churches were a worthwhile goal or whether we should settle for having white churches, black churches, Latino churches and Asian churches. Loria Tapia, the National Pastor for the Central Pastoral Office for Hispanic Ministries, said that she thought we should work toward fusion churches. Rev. Kim agreed.

I got the feeling of being a fusion church while we were in worship at General Assembly. General Assembly lasts five days and there is a worship service each night. Part of being a fusion church means having different parts of the service appeal to different groups. I don't like standing and singing one song after another for 30

minutes, but I will happily do it so we can worship together. And I will happily do it so I can hear William Barber preach.

I hope we can get to a point where we can't track how many African American congregations, Latino congregations and Asian American congregations we have. That will mean we are members of the same churches instead of just coming together for General Assembly every two years.

## **Conclusion**

Jesus knew it would be hard. Some people want to preserve hierarchy; they resist the idea of a community in which there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female. Bringing those different groups of people together will cause division.

Having ethnic churches is a good first step toward the kingdom. It has only been in the last 50 years that Disciples have gotten intentional about bringing diverse groups of people into the movement.

Now it is time to take the next step. Most of us don't have many friends in other ethnic groups. We can't have a deep appreciation for different cultural perspectives unless we interact with them on a regular basis. Then we will be reconciled; the other will no longer be the other. We will all just be Disciples.

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