



Massanutten
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Jesus We Don't Like to Talk About

A Sermon Preached by Ann Pettit

August 15, 2010

20th Sunday in Ordinary time (Year C)

Luke 12:49-56

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"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! From now on five in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three; they will be divided: father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law."

He also said to the crowds, "When you see a cloud rising in the west, you immediately say, 'It is going to rain'; and so it happens. And when you see the south wind blowing, you say, 'There will be scorching heat'; and it happens. You hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present time?"

In these hot, humid days of August, I'd like to take us back 8 months, minus a couple days. Do you remember where you were, and what you were doing? It was the Friday before Christmas. The first of several snow storms was moving into the area and, I suspect you were hunkering down with provision enough for the days ahead.

That first snow was beautiful as we moved into the Christmas week. Of course, I also need to say it played havoc with our 4th Sunday Advent opportunities for worship and celebration, and caused all those involved a great deal of consternation as they made decisions about cancellations and postponements. Even so, the way the snow entered, blanketing the world around us in a silence that truly glimmered with peace and wonder seemed a fitting landscape for the hearing of Jesus' understated, quiet entry into our world. 'Silent Night, Holy Night' fairly jumped out of the music into the corners of our lives on Christmas Eve as the Prince of Peace arrived again in our hearts.

Well, whether or not Christmas is clothed in snowy wonder, that season of Good News affords us many opportunities for celebration, family reunion and joyous expression of what God has done in our lives through the birth of Jesus. But there remains a dark undercurrent which not even our celebrations can banish, weaving its way through the narratives:

*He has filled the hungry with good things, **and sent the rich away empty**, said Mary in response to her cousin, Elizabeth's awe and joy; Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace **among those whom he favors**; cried the heavenly host of angels; And, then there was Herod-the-King, somewhat **unsettled with the arrival of a Messiah**.*

Like that dark undercurrent, Jesus' words to us today are hard ones to square with our expectations of Jesus as friend, savior, reconciler and peacemaker. Even our understanding of Jesus as Lord can be somewhat tame as we envision being led into new opportunities to serve and experience God at work in our lives. *Jesus teaching on the Sea of Galilee, Jesus raising Lazarus, Jesus welcoming the children, the risen Jesus greeting frightened, confused disciples* with the words "Peace be with you." These pieces of Jesus' ministry provide inviting images of love and grace to propel us forward in our faith. These are the places we find it much more appealing to dwell.

There are enough of these discordant threads running through both the prophecies of the Messiah, and the gospel accounts of his life, that we must confront what meaning this has for us in our time.

This passage in Luke falls within a series of many hard sayings, all of them aimed at broadening our vision for what is right and just in the world. Just prior to chapter twelve Jesus chastised the Pharisees and the Lawyers. The meticulous way in which they carried out their work was the very thing that kept them from seeing the work of the Kingdom of God. Jesus' words call their attention to this, though I suspect his point evaded them. By their way of looking at life and the world around them, they were attentive to the details of their work; they were good at their jobs.

One of the difficulties in these hard words of Jesus is that they seem to call into

question both our experience of the love of God in Jesus, and those things which we've come to understand as sacred, life-giving and blessed by God. Just a week ago, we blessed the new life that was formed when Katie Lown and Brennan Gray entered the covenant of marriage and a few days later we gathered with the family of Helene Schneider, giving thanks for her life and asking God's comfort for her family in her absence. We are confident that God was in our midst throughout both of these times of worship and celebration, offering grace and, yes, peace. It's as a family we gather together in times of joy and pain; it is family which offers a refuge, a place of belonging and certainty that defies the powers surrounding it. Surely Jesus isn't messing with the family unit?!?

In both the ancient middle-eastern culture and in our world today, the family represents a place of safety and protection. Yet, the same refuge that comforts us in times of pain and loss, can also keep us from entering into life fully, embracing changes that might interfere with the very fabric of that safe space. Jesus' words about division in the family should be read with an eye toward any and all things which keep us from following Jesus into the places that demand much from us – even those things that have been sacred. Jesus was shedding light on a gaping blind spot in the culture of the day: that good, decent, hard working people could, by virtue of their devotion, interfere with what is good and right on a broader, deeper scale.

One of the Ancient Desert Fathers wrote 'unawareness is the root of all evil.' A more familiar saying to us is: *money is the root of all evil*. Perhaps at the deepest level, it is our unawareness of how money – and other things in our lives – capture our attention, devotion and minds, that truly keeps us from seeing what really matters.

We only need to look at the life of the Apostle Paul, who began his career as a zealous Pharisee. He was good at his job; he did what he was supposed to do to the letter of the law. Yet it was just this energy, drive and passion that kept him from seeing what God was doing right in front of him. He was willfully unaware of the new direction his life needed take for him to be faithful to the God he truly wanted to serve.

Teresa Berger (currently teaching at Yale Divinity School), in a 2004 article printed in *Christian Century* wrote: "If our world were nothing but a place of created goodness and profound beauty, a space of flourishing for all, just and life-giving for all in God's creation, then Jesus' challenge would be deeply troubling."

The world in which we live is not a space *flourishing for all; life-giving space* doesn't describe the world around us. Jesus didn't come to interrupt a world which was going in the right direction, but rather to fix a tragically broken one; he came to interrupt patterns of living which deprive *us all*; patterns which prevent us from experiencing the goodness and profound beauty that bring meaning and joy to life.

One of the ways this happens for us is when we become willing to engage these very words of Jesus at the level wherein it is uncomfortable for us to hear them. Up to this point what I think I've told you is that Jesus challenges us to guard against those things which blind us to the heart of his message. But that makes these dozens of hard verses in this section of Luke palatable – and we cannot leave here today with a message that has lulled us into thinking these words aren't as provocative as they seem at first glance. Rather, we must leave dis comforted by them. We must leave with the certainty

that Jesus has a word of change for us that we do not want to hear, which will upset somebody in our lives, which will shed light on how my expectations create hardship for another. Jesus wants us to wonder about those things of which we are unaware.

In our world, individualism is a highly prized quality. Encouragement to fulfill ourselves, our hopes, our dreams, our needs - to be our own person is heard from all fronts. While there are good roots for this – that each person is valuable, created in the image of God - it may be helpful for us to remember in our study of Scripture, that the earliest audience for the writings in it was a community. The words were heard by the people gathered together who saw themselves not as individuals first, but as the people of God, made up of individuals. When individualism trumps the well-being of the larger community in order to ‘keep the peace’ Jesus’ words of division ring out strong and true. The word of God is always heard at a level that should cause us to wonder not simply: what does this hold for me and my life? – but what does it say to us and about us and how does it interrupt the way we’re doing things right now?

How do we begin to examine our lives in such a way as to respond to these hard words of Jesus? The nuts and bolts of each of our lives, the patterns we need to address are specific to each of us, as well as all of us as a community. How we spend our time, what we do with our resources, where our energies are focused are the textbooks for our study of Jesus’ words. Jesus calls us to enter those chapters of our days with a discerning eye and to struggle with our choices and questions, engaging them at a new level. We’re called to ask not only ‘can I?’ but ‘should I?’

*Should I be in this place,
hold this position,
do this task,
make this purchase,
walk this path?*

Should I do what I’m setting out to do?

Jesus tells us frankly that we must look beyond what’s easily seen toward the world to which Jesus is leading that we would, indeed, be venues of the lasting peace Christ was born to bring. Let us pray,

Almighty and eternal God, so draw our hearts to you, so guide our minds, so fill our imaginations, so control our wills that we may be wholly yours, utterly dedicated to you, and then use us, we pray, as you will, to your glory and the welfare of your people, Amen.