

TWELFTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, Proper 15c Melinda J. Wagner  
Jeremiah 23:23-29 First Immanuel Lutheran  
Church  
(Psalm 82) Portland, Oregon  
Hebrews 11:29-12:2 August 15, 2010  
LUKE 12:49-56

Today's scripture readings are not what we expected! We came to church this morning looking for a little strength, a little hope, a little perspective for the week to come. Instead we hear that God's Word is like fire, like a hammer that breaks a rock into pieces. We hear Jesus say he has come not to bring peace but division and conflict.

It's disturbing. It seems to go against everything we've learned about Christianity as an expression of love and peace and harmony. Perhaps it also goes against what we personally expect from faith, which is comfort for our lives and support in times of trouble. Even further, I think what disturbs us is that we genuinely see God as a God of compassion. God is the one who forgives, who accepts, who welcomes imperfect people like us. "God is love." But here we see a harsher, tougher side of God.

One thing I've learned as a pastor is that it's useless to try to explain away difficult scriptures. Instead we're meant to go deep with them and ask what God would have us learn. What I see today is an expression of God's fierceness and God's passion. Specifically I see God's passion to bring into being a world that is far different, far better, than the world we see today. The message is: it's going to take some real upheaval to bring that about!

It will take upheaval because we human beings have a way of continually resisting – even violently resisting – the goodness God wants for us. Look what we did to Jesus Christ. God came to us in person, in Christ, to bring God's saving power. Our human response was to put him on the cross.

Today's scripture shows Jesus on the way to Jerusalem, where that cross is waiting for him. You can sense the stress as Jesus prepares for his "baptism of fire." But you can also sense in Christ an intense determination to do God's will: "How I wish that fire were already kindled!" Beyond his suffering, beyond the cross and the grave, there is going to be a rising again that brings a new day.

Jesus shares God's passion and fierceness, and he calls his followers to share them too. When Jesus says families will be divided over him, he's describing what actually happened in the early church. When people decided for Jesus, it often meant being disowned by their families. Choosing to follow Jesus changed everything for them.

Just as following Jesus changes everything for us. Jesus warned that a commitment of faith would have implications for every area of our lives-- and it does. When we take our faith commitment seriously, it shapes our values, our priorities, our goals, our behavior. It changes our attitude toward material possessions, it inspires us to take more seriously our moral responsibilities. Old patterns of life need to change when we come to see ourselves as God's people, marked with the cross, claimed in love, and called to reflect Christ in everything we do.

This is not in any way a contradiction of God's compassion. It's really an extension of God's compassion -- that is, God's passionate love.

God loves us and this world so much that God cannot be content with simply comforting us. God doesn't stop with forgiving us and accepting us and supporting us. More than this, God challenges us to translate God's love into actions. To let God's passion for good become our passion for good.

You and I might be content to come here on a Sunday morning looking for a little strength, a little hope, a little perspective to get us through the week. But God wants to give us so much more. God wants to give us an entire world made new. Relationships restored. Every child of earth treated with dignity and respect. The hungry fed, the poor clothed, the sick made whole, the weak strengthened. Every war brought to an end. The natural world preserved and renewed. All of earth's creatures united, praising God. God has majestic goals for us. And to tell you the truth, I don't know whether God's goals will be achieved in this world or whether God will have to finally end this world and fulfill them in the next. But I do know that God calls us to pursue God's goals with all our energy and effort, here and now.

It can be costly, just as Jesus warns. Even working toward the simplest goals can bring opposition.

Like reaching out to the poor. This is a ministry Jesus has given us here at First Immanuel. But as a member once remarked, "It seems like whenever you really try to help the poor, people get angry with you." Whether it's giving a dollar to someone on the street, or trying to change public policy, you can expect disapproval and criticism from somebody. When you expand the food pantry to serve more people, when you build a ramp to make social services more accessible, there's always going to be someone who objects and grumbles about the change or all "those people" congregating on the sidewalk.

And when you start addressing the root causes of hunger and poverty, working for long-term solutions, looking to change systems, the opposition really comes. Dom Helder Camara, an archbishop in Brazil, used to say: "When I give food to the poor,

they call me a saint. But when I ask why the poor have no food, they call me a communist.”

Jesus calls us to work for peace, but putting that calling into practice can raise opposition too. The Quakers are one of the traditional peace churches with many members who are pacifist. One Quaker says, “We work for peace, and if you really want to cause conflict, work for peace.” (Tom Mullen, *Laughing Out Loud and Other Religious Experiences*)

Working for equality can also be divisive. I know a pastor who served a Baptist church in a small town in Texas. He was approached by a couple who wanted to be married. The man was black, the woman white. This pastor agreed to do the wedding -- such a simple act, a sacred act, but he knew it was also a risky act in that particular town. For doing that wedding, the pastor was fired by his congregation, and he also received death threats – which he took seriously because the Ku Klux Klan was still active there. This was not 50 years ago. It was five years ago.

And I’m quite sure that similar stories could be told today about pastors who have agreed to perform services of union for gay couples, because they believe God blesses these lifelong, faithful, committed relationships and that couples who form families this way deserve the Christian support of their congregation just as heterosexual couples do. It would seem simple. But God’s inclusive love engenders opposition, because the world we see today is not yet the new world God is bringing into being.

Jesus is not calling us to create conflict for conflict’s sake. There are such things as “ungodly divisions” – the kind of disagreements that can tear congregations or communities apart. But there are also “godly divisions” – the kind of divisions that come when we take a stand for the sake of what we believe is right, what we believe is compassionate and good and true, what we believe expresses God’s highest and most loving intention.

Following Christ is not simply about practicing kindness and gentleness. It is also about taking a firm stand for your faith. Which is good news. Because on any given Sunday morning, we don’t only come here looking for personal comfort and strength. We also come here looking for meaning and purpose and direction. We may be teenagers testing out our identity. We may be young adults looking to make a difference. We may be in the middle ages of life, with energy and influence to share. We may be elders, looking to spend our latter years doing more than just needlepoint and crosswords.

And God graciously gives us exactly what we’re looking for--meaning and purpose that reflect God’s fierce and passionate love. God calls us to take our stand against

whatever demeans or diminishes life. God calls us to “read the signs of our times” and discern what death-dealing systems need to be resisted and opposed. God calls us to act courageously against abuse in any form, against racism and prejudice, against the powers of addiction. God calls us to act urgently to protect the environment, to make our lifestyle sustainable and proactively renew this wounded earth. God calls us to confront greed, to take up the cause of the hungry, to welcome the stranger, to heal the sick.

I wonder what courageous actions God might be calling you toward, today, at this time in your life. I wonder what decisions lie before you that could be an opportunity to express your faith. I wonder what kinds of changes might be necessary for you to make. I wonder what faithful stands God could be motivating you to take, today, this week.

God is leading all of us beyond what we now see.  
Thanks be to God. Amen.