

A House Divided

Sermon at Evergreen Presbyterian Church, Dothan, AL

8/18/2019

Focus: God is at work in all situations - even in division

Function: We are called, as followers of Jesus, to seek God's peace and justice - even if it brings division.

Move 1 - Context

As mentioned in parts of the liturgy, we're tackling a tough topic today - division. Usually, in the lectionary, we are more likely to run into texts about Jesus preaching peace than about division, but not this time! When we come to this scripture, Jesus has already done ministry in Galilee and is now turning towards Jerusalem, where he will continue his ministry until his death. As Jesus begins his journey towards Jerusalem, he is joined by his disciples and along the way, crowds of people coming to hear him teach. And that is how we come to our text for today: Luke 12:49-56. Listen now for a Word from God...

49 "I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled!
50 I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what stress I am under until it is completed!
51 Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division!
52 From now on five in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three;
53 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."

54 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. 55 And when you see the south wind blowing, you say, ‘There will be scorching heat’; and it happens. 56 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?”

This is the Word of the Lord. (Thanks be to God.)

Move 2 - What the heck is this text?

This scripture is a doozy. What is going on? What is this Fire? Hasn't Jesus already been baptized? And he seems to be pretty harsh on folks who just want to know whether or not they need an umbrella. Not to mention that this supposed “Prince of Peace” seems to be contradicting himself.....What do we do with this text?

Let's start at the beginning - when Jesus references fire. There are many purposes for fire that are noted in the bible, including the presence of God and the Spirit, purification, and yes, even judgment. This metaphorical fire that Christ brings most likely serves all of these purposes, but it is really emphasizing what Jesus says later: that he is bringing *division*. Jesus is definitely passionate about what he says, perhaps even impatient! His reference to his upcoming baptism is a way of foretelling his own death and resurrection. The message that he is preaching is no small matter: for him, it is literally life and death.

So what changed? Isn't Jesus supposed to be about peace? While there are many passages of scripture to support a peaceful Jesus, we also know that Jesus was radical. He flipped tables in the temple and told a rich man to give everything he has to the poor. Because Jesus routinely challenged the establishment and the status quo, he was a pretty controversial

character. Religious leaders were especially not a fan of his. Jesus proclaimed that the kingdom of God brings justice to the oppressed and lifts up the lowly. And when power structures are doubted or disrupted, division usually follows.

Move 3 - Family matters

For Jesus to use the household as an example of division made sense. In the first-century world, the household was the building block of society - it was a sort of microcosm. If divisions were happening within households, they were happening within larger structures and institutions as well.

The idea of division in one's household is a familiar one for me. Growing up, politics and faith were talked about in my house, but only from one point of view and perspective. I usually took the opinions of people I trusted as reliable facts, especially my family. As I went through college, and then through seminary, I started learning more and developing opinions and beliefs of my own. This began to bring tension into my household. While I didn't live with my parents anymore, we have always been close. My dad and I have a good relationship and we share passions for music and art. We also share a stubbornness and firm belief that we are RIGHT. Both of us are informed about politics, but we agree on very little. As I began to voice my disagreement and point of view, I often felt shut down and as though my beliefs didn't matter - there was no changing anyone's mind - there was hardly even civil conversation. We were a house divided, and not just over which sports team we chose to support.

Last summer, I worked with a faith-based organization in Baltimore and was overjoyed when my parents came to visit and see this city I had grown to love. When we were out to dinner one night, my dad made a remark that really bothered me and I voiced my frustrations with the language he used. Very quickly, he got angry and told me that if I wanted to continue to police his beliefs and language that I would only drive us apart. I was

dumbfounded and very hurt. I excused myself from the table to gather my thoughts. All I could think was - I'm not even trying to change his mind or what he does! All I want is for my voice, beliefs, and feelings to be heard. How could my newfound heart for justice be fracturing such an important relationship?

My dad and I are still close. He made an incredibly moving speech at my wedding earlier this year and I just spent a few lovely days with my husband at my parents' house. I am grateful that we still have a good relationship, but I won't lie and say all is well. We still have hearty disagreements and I do sometimes worry about sustaining our relationship.

Move 4 - Larger story

My story is not unique. Not everyone has stressed relationships with their parents, but I know that most people have some relationships that have undergone tension, stress, or even painful and permanent breaks. We live in a time when division can seem more common than unity. When one-sided rhetoric is heard more than a balanced discussion.

Reconciliation is a buzz-word, but how can we reconcile when communal beliefs and practices, political parties and even Christian denominations seem to have less and less in common? We even have a history of significant division within our own denomination. Churches have made the heartbreaking decision to leave the PCUSA when our denomination voted to have more inclusive language around marriage and ordination in our Book of Order. And that wasn't even the first time we've split!

Move 5 - Back to the text

Even back in the time of Jesus, division was not an unfamiliar topic. It was so prevalent, in fact, that Jesus felt the need to address it! This text appears in the lectionary because it tells an important part of the story of Jesus. The message that Jesus preached was not easy. He spoke in

parables about open tables and ate with the kind of folks that the religious institution shunned. He called the poor blessed and welcomed strangers. Jesus preached a radical love that was more important than religiosity, more important than financial stability, more important than the laws that benefited the wealthy and powerful at the expense of the poor and disenfranchised. The peace that Jesus talks about all over the gospels is the kind of peace that comes when justice is present and the oppressed are liberated. The problem with that peace is that it tips the scales. In the kingdom of God, the low are brought up, but so are the high brought down. This was and is a disruption of the status quo. And when change is inevitable and people are uncomfortable, division is a natural consequence. It's not that Jesus is in the business of intentionally breaking up families - but he's not here to reinforce a broken system, either. Just as fire must sometimes cleanse a forest for new growth to appear, so must our lives and our systems go through cycles of death and new life. Jesus was headed for the cross, but his journey didn't stop there. Division may be our present reality but it is not the end of our story. Whether or not individual relationships are repaired, Jesus implores his followers to work towards a new reality: the just and merciful and abundant reign of God.

Move 6 - Our present time

The call that Jesus gave his followers did not end with them. We, too, are called to participate in bringing the kingdom of God to earth. We are called to love our neighbor, to feed the hungry, to visit people in prison, and give shelter to people without a place to go. It is not an easy call and it is definitely not always comfortable.

How are we interpreting and responding to our present time? Are we like the crowds in the text? Are we hypocrites who pay more attention to the weather than to our communities and relationships? What is our sociopolitical and theological forecast? I'll admit - sometimes my perspective of our present time is bleak. I wonder if reconciliation is

possible in such polarized times. When politicians would prefer to shout over each other than work together on policy changes. When I seem to have less and less in common with folks I love. When I do my best to stand for what I think is right, only to move farther away from the supposed “other side.” Division is rampant and the chasm between us seems only to grow. But we are not alone.

Christ took on flesh and dwelled among us. He was put to death. And he redeems us with his resurrection. Because of this, we can have hope. We can find comfort in the reminder that even in times of division, God is still at work. And we are called to join in that work, too. So may we focus more on kindness than on material goods. May we embody hospitality even when we worry about our own security. May we care more about our siblings in Christ than about being right. May we love our neighbor the best we can, even if it means we don't abide by the status quo. May we be harbingers of grace and peace and radical love - especially in the face of heartbreaking divisions. May we be true followers of Jesus and work together towards the kingdom of God. Amen.