

Brown Memorial Park Avenue Presbyterian Church
Rev. Gretchen van Utt
August 18, 2018 ~ Luke 12:49-56
“Households Divided”

Ordinarily, our response to the reading of scripture is *Thanks be to God!*
Today, a more fitting response would simply be *Yikes!* So please pray with me ...
*Holy God, you spoke to the prophet Jeremiah saying, “Is not my word like fire ...
and like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces?” [23:29] ... This morning’s lesson is
that hard, God, and it burns, and we need your help to guide us to understanding. ...
May your Spirit move among us, so that the words of my mouth and the meditations
of our hearts may be pleasing to you, God of wisdom and grace. Amen.*

In self-defense, let me start by pointing out the obvious -- that I didn’t write the Bible! Nor did I design the lectionary cycle. And if I were picking the gospel lesson for my last Sunday as your Sabbatical Support Clergy, I certainly wouldn’t have chosen this passage from Luke.

This is a troubling text, and any lectionary-following preacher in her or his right mind schedules vacation or study leave (or a sabbatical) in order to be away for this particular week of Year C. ... Michele and Andrew were smart. I, on the other hand, failed to check the lectionary before signing my contract with you. So here I am, grappling with how to make sense of these divisive and downright insulting words.

How can this be the same Jesus who, the Bible says, will “guide our feet in the way of peace”... whose birth the angels announced? How can this be the healer, the sought-after dinner guest, and the Lord of Love who embraced little children?

It’s hard to imagine – but, of course, it *is* the same Jesus. And, this message of family division and generational conflict isn’t unique to this passage. We can’t just write it off to Jesus having a bad day.

Remember, Jesus was only 12 when he aggravated his parents by staying in Jerusalem when everyone else had set off for home after the Passover celebration. When Mary and Joseph noticed that he wasn’t with them, they frantically returned to the city only to find him happily studying in the temple. A little stunned by their stupidity, he casually said to them, “Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house?” ... Already, he was redefining family. That’s what tweens do.

But then, years later, at the beginning of his public ministry – by which time you’d think he’d have outgrown his attitude – he returned to Nazareth to teach and provoked his hometown (no doubt, including his family), by speaking on texts that seem intentionally chosen to offend them.

And still later, while teaching elsewhere in Galilee, Jesus was told that his mother and brothers were waiting outside, wanting to see him. And he replied, “My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it.” Kind of dismissive.

Even Jesus’ parable of the Prodigal Son – that beloved story of family reunion, of mending the precious ties that bind when they’ve come unraveled – even *this* is a tale of division. The loving father’s act of grace and reconciliation, heals one family rift, but creates another when the elder son

becomes convinced that his position of priority in the family – a position firmly established by the law of primogeniture – is being undermined.

Jesus seems to make a habit of dismissing the importance of family ties. That may not feel like a big deal to us in 21st century America, but in 1st century Palestine, it was a *very* big deal. ... In that time and place, the family, the household, was the most important unit of society. To speak of divisions in the family, or even a disruption in the laws of inheritance, was to speak of shattering the status quo, of turning the social order upside down. ... And, of course, that's exactly what Jesus intended.

But, this challenging text isn't meant to be prescriptive. It's descriptive. Jesus isn't saying that family bonds are a bad thing that we *ought* to sever, or necessarily even *need* to sever, in order to be faithful. He's saying that when family gets in the way of following him, of hearing and doing God's word, then we need to choose what is right and true and faithful even if that threatens the precious ties that bind.

In the mid-80's, at the height of the contra war, I made my first trip to Nicaragua, traveling with a few other church people to stay in a village in the middle of the war zone in order to build a sister-city relationship there. One of those in our group was a young woman in her 20's – as kind and gentle a soul as I will ever know. Jean had grown up in Maryland and until then had never travelled outside the state. And yet, she decided to go ahead of us to spend a week in El Salvador, which at the time was experiencing terrible government-sponsored repression and violence. Knowing that her parents would not applaud her plans, Jean said nothing to them until she was in the Miami airport to change planes. Then she called her mother and said, "*Hey, I'm in Florida! I decided to take a vacation. I'll call in a couple of weeks, when I get home. Love you.*" Not exactly a lie, but a shading of the truth that one could still get away with in those pre-smart phone days.

When we picked up Jean at the Managua airport a week later, it was clear that she had been deeply moved by her time in El Salvador. Over the next several years, both on her own and as a worker for Catholic Relief, she returned to that battered country countless times. It was a ministry of presence and compassion that she didn't choose. It chose her. She was captured by the love of God and had to respond, regardless of the risk to herself or to the family bonds she cherished.

I don't know how the conversation with her parents went when she returned home from that first trip. But, I assume that in time they grew to understand her calling and learned to live with their fear. If they wanted a relationship with their daughter, they really didn't have a choice, because Jean would not have been deterred. ... Family values, gospel style.

The kingdom that Jesus was ushering in, the commonwealth of God, was, and is, an upside down realm where family is redefined, where the first are last and last first, where the poor are blessed and the captives set free. And we want to say "OK, Jesus, that's nice ... but couldn't you be a little more gentle about this kingdom stuff? Couldn't you be more like Jean? How about reform, not revolution ... so we all have a chance to adjust. ... But, of course, that request could only come from those of us who have never seriously worried about where our next meal is coming from, or whether we'll have a job or a roof over our heads next week, or whether we'll be pulled over today for the offense of *driving while black*, or whether we'll be beaten up because of our gender identification. ... This request could only come from those of us who are safe and have benefitted from the status quo that Jesus wants to dismantle.

All right, we get it, but why does Jesus have to be so strident here, so harsh and angry? Well, that's easier to understand when we remember the context. If we look back to chapter 9, we see that Luke comes to a turning point there, a critical juncture in his gospel. "*When the days grew near for him to be taken up,*" Luke says, "*he set his face to go to Jerusalem.*" [9:51]

Opposition was building, tension was mounting, the authorities were getting nervous, and Jesus was going to walk into the thick of it. He headed for Jerusalem. He knew there was no faithful way to avoid the conflict. He knew that his days were numbered. There was no time left for polite compromise. The truth needed to be spoken so clearly, so starkly, that no one could fail to get the message. Even those clinging most tenaciously to the status quo would be jarred out of their denial.

The face I have been picturing this week is that of Luis Alvarez. In June, looking frail, gaunt, and very old, with a weak and trembling voice, he testified before congress about the urgent need for them to act to preserve health care for 9-11 first responders. He had been a first responder. In fact, the day after his testimony, he was due to receive his 69th round of chemotherapy for cancer caused by his work at the site of the World Trade Center. But he never got the treatment. He wasn't strong enough and it wouldn't have done any good. ... 18 days later, he died – at age 53.

Like Jesus, Luis Alvarez knew that his days were numbered, that there was no time left for niceties. To look at him was hard. To listen to him was hard. But he was called to speak the truth, right up to the end, no matter how uncomfortable his presence made us – and no matter how difficult that trip was for him.

The role of the church, it is often said, is to "comfort the afflicted and to afflict the comfortable." I don't know whether Luis Alvarez was a Christian, but that doesn't matter – he modeled the role of the church, when many in the church would have preferred to look away.

One more story comes to mind this morning – a story many of you know well. In the mid 90's, Brown Memorial initiated an intentional and thoughtful discernment process about whether to publically declare itself a More Light Congregation. You were the first or second church in the presbytery to do this. It may not sound extraordinary now, a quarter of a century later, but it was a courageous act in a time when churches and their leaders were being brought up on charges for such audacious behavior.

This week, I spoke to several members about this time in the life of Brown. The first few I spoke to didn't remember it being a particularly big deal. They didn't recall much concern about the possibility of losing members over the issue. But for others, asking about their memories pricked a pain that was still palpable. ... They remember a volatile, angry time, and a time of deep anxiety. They remember church leaders feeling battered. They remember the pastor receiving threatening letters – letters scary enough to turn over to the police. And they remember losing members on both sides of the question.

One couple left in deep pain because, for them, the church was moving way too slowly and cautiously on an issue of justice, and an issue that was about their very identity, about the wideness of God's mercy and love, and about whether the church's tent was big enough to welcome and embrace them, just as they were, as God created them.

Others left in fear and anger because it felt like the very foundation of the church was shaking beneath them. They felt threatened. Long accepted understandings of God and sin seemed up for grabs. Nothing felt secure – not even the “family values” that once went unquestioned.

This was not an insignificant change that was going on. It was a real paradigm shift. In fact, things had already been shifting for a couple of decades. ... Some started to sense it 50 years ago this week – Woodstock week. The old doctrines and social norms had become confining. The tent had become uncomfortably small. People, mostly young people, needed to break out, to forge new relationships, to experiment with new ways of being in the world. It felt urgent. And, heaven knows, a lot of family bonds frayed. Rifts formed. Chasms opened up. ... Some were healed. Some were not.

Well, 2,000 years ago, Jesus was talking about a paradigm shift, too. He felt the urgency of it and lashed out at the crowds (that would include us) *“You hypocrites!”* he said. *“You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present time?”* Why do you cling to the old ways?

Jesus’ harsh words are as important today as they were back then. ... God is still calling us to let out the seams of the tent. To let our boundaries – national boundaries, faith boundaries, family boundaries, gender boundaries – to let them all be more fluid, more open, more compassionate, more just. ... It’s not easy – never has been, never will be. We will always be held back by our fears, and by our comfort with the status quo.

On the face of it, there doesn’t sound like any good news in this text. But there is. Jesus’ stridency, and anger and impatience, are actually exactly what we need to hear periodically. They are vehicles of mercy and grace just as surely as his tenderness is. ... Look at what Brown has become: a welcoming congregation, committed to the ministry of opening the seams of the tent, so that all who enter here can breathe free, and so that the Spirit can move among them with abandon. For many it was a painful journey getting here. When some yearn for change and others yearn for the way things were, there will be conflict and division. But if we remain courageous and faithful, new bonds will form, even if some old ones fray. We will not travel alone. Our brothers and sisters will always be those who hear and do the will of God.

This place feels nurturing and free today. But, we can’t be complacent. We can’t get stuck here. The Spirit keeps calling us to new places and new people in need of justice and compassion and love. And God keeps sending the next generations to pry open our hearts and minds even further, to let in yet more light.

If we can do that, we will find that Jesus’ promise of peace is a reliable promise. ... It’s not an easy or painless peace. ... It is not always a polite peace. ... It is certainly not a peace that will emerge from half-hearted commitment.

But the peace of Christ – the peace that passes all understanding, the peace that transcends boundaries of family, race, gender, sexuality, and even religion – is a promise we can count on. May it be so, for you and for me. Amen