

Pastor's Message – 8/14/22
Isaiah 5:1-7 Luke 12:49-56

Last Sunday's theme about the church's foundation and its future in faith was positive and uplifting, but this week – what a downer! There is real potential for both readings today, both from Isaiah and from Luke, to send us heading for the doors and deciding not to come back to hear more gloom and doom.

In essence, the prophet is saying,

“Thus saith the Lord,
'Woe is upon you for your sins,
and a curse for your waywardness,
and there will be no stopping it.”

This week's reading from the gospel of Luke is not just confrontational, it's frightening. We often hear Jesus say, “Don't be afraid.” But, today, we hear reasons we may be terrified to follow him.

Jesus says he comes to bring fire to blaze across the earth and longs for it to be kindled already. He's heading toward a baptism that will be his own death. He comes to bring not peace, but a sword. Families will be divided against each other. The kingdom of God is so completely at odds with the ways of the kingdoms of this world that the world's response to the coming of the kingdom is likely to be hostile, if not violent.

And just in case his disciples thought he was talking about some future in the by and by, he makes the point clear—no, this is the time. This sky. This earth. These people. Now! These are signs that God's kingdom is coming, signs of the world's reaction against its coming.

But let's go back to the words that are easier to hear. "My beloved had a vineyard on a rich and fertile hill," sings the prophet. "He plowed the land, cleared its stones, and planted it with the best vines. In the middle he built a watchtower and carved a winepress in the nearby rocks. Then he waited for a harvest of sweet grapes," (vv. 1-2a).

The reading from Isaiah is a song and an unusual song. We don't know the original tune, but we do know that it ends not in praise or hope, but in disappointment and perhaps despair, God's own despair at what had happened. The nation had failed to yield the proper fruit, so its destruction had become inevitable. We begin the reading with the delight of God the gardener who does everything to produce a great vineyard. Then we encounter the wrath that will destroy the vineyard since it produces only wild grapes. And we conclude with God's own profound sadness at all that had happened and would now happen.

Now I wonder if some would dismiss this reading from Isaiah as just an example of a writer and a people who believed, once upon a time, that God was the dispenser of reward and punishment. The righteous, they believed, received reward for their good behavior and the evil were punished. The righteous were blest and those who

disobeyed God got what they deserved. That relationship was based on God's offer to bless, and if His people listened and followed, they would receive continued blessings.

But then Jesus comes, and things change, or do they? We seem to have two readings today which are not entirely dissimilar. So, what changes does Jesus bring and what remains the same?

The reading from Luke today contains one of the "hard sayings" of Jesus. Let's face it: some of the things Jesus says are hard to swallow. Or it may be that we're just unwilling to listen or obey. So, what did Jesus mean when he said that he came to cause "division"? I'm wondering if Jesus is actively bringing division or is division the result of a choice of disobedience?

Many of our hymns paint a picture of a gentle Jesus. Think of "Away in a Manger: "Away in a manger, no crib for a bed, the little Lord Jesus laid down his sweet head." Or how about "Silent Night: "Holy infant, so tender and mild." Reading through most of our Christmas songs paints a different picture of the Jesus we hear about today.

But what about the adult Jesus? We hear a lot about the Jesus who is a healer, who offers kindness and mercy and welcomes children and eats with sinners. This is a Jesus who offers peace and walks with me and talks with me and tells me I am his own as I come to the garden. So, what's the deal with this Jesus who says, "I have come to set the world on fire . . . Do you think I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I have come to divide people against each other!"

Division is a troubling word, and as it happens, divisive talk and actions from Jesus or about Jesus keep cropping up in the gospels. Consider:

- When John the Baptist was announcing Jesus' coming, he said, "His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire" (Luke 3:17).
- In the early days of Jesus' ministry, when he visited the Nazareth synagogue with his reputation as a preacher and healer preceding him, the congregation initially "spoke well of him" (Luke 4:22). But Jesus wasn't content to leave it at that, and intentionally provoked them with his "hometown" comments to the point that they wanted to throw him over a cliff (Luke 4:16-30).
- When Jesus spoke to a crowd at the festival of booths in Jerusalem about rivers of living water, some hearers decided he was the Messiah. Others doubted it, however, and the gospel narrator says, "So there was a division in the crowd because of him" (John 7:43).
- When a would-be follower told Jesus he first wanted to bury his father, the sense of Jesus' response was that the man should leave his family obligations behind, which, if the man had done so, would have effectively divided him from his family (Luke 9:57-60).
- In elaborating on his "I have come to bring ... division" comments in today's reading, Jesus talked about setting father against son, mother against daughter, mother-in-law against daughter-in-law and vice versa in all three cases.
- And let's not forget that in the Matthean parallel to today's reading, Jesus

says, "I have not come to bring peace, but a sword" (Matthew 10:34).

Not much seems to have changed from the Old Testament words of Isaiah to the New Testament words of Jesus. In fact, Jesus' call today still has a divisive element to it. He still calls us to divide ourselves from those who urge us to morally stray, to not put family loyalty above doing his will, to disbelieve and not follow those who act as if peace and happiness lie in possessions, to stand against societal voices that build up the self at the expense of others. In our individual case, the divisive part of Jesus' call may be quite specific and personally tailored to our life. Each one of us may be called to sacrifice something or someone and choose God instead of whatever may keep us from following Jesus and putting God first.

What would it mean to this Church if the prophet would sing, "My beloved had a Church in a rich and fertile place. He plowed the land, cleared its stones, and planted it with the best vines. In the middle he built a watchtower and carved a winepress in the nearby rocks. Then he waited for a harvest of sweet grapes."

"But now I will cause its walls to crack and its bell tower to leak. I will cause mold to grow on the ceiling and the walls. I will cause weeds to grow up among the flower beds and the parking lot to crumble and its trees and plantings to dry up and wither?" Is this God's judgement on the church of today? "I will cause its people to leave and never come back. I will let this Church die and another to take its place."

Faith calls us to make choices. What will we accept? What will we reject? The gospel text challenges us to take sides. Will we accept, or reject, Jesus and His message? Jesus wants us to decide for ourselves what is right—right now! We are set apart by the decision we have made to follow or not follow Jesus.

Many Christians believe in retribution. They want a God who tells them that there should be an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, to be exclusionary, and they become furious when anyone suggests another kind of God who asks them to be merciful and forgiving. ...

But the God revealed in Jesus Christ is far too generous. He gives his all in love for others and expects us to do the same. Such a God is too demanding for most Christians. They want one who only requires a tithe. Only 10% They sing about total self-giving, but in the end, they would like to sing, "One-tenth to Jesus I surrender, one-tenth to him I gladly give -- I surrender one-tenth, I surrender one-tenth." Ultimately, they want a God who lets them choose how much to give and what kind of commitment is expected of them.

I think when we read the words from Isaiah today and hear the words of Jesus today, our challenge is to hear Jesus' words as gospel: as good news. Our task is to look for and celebrate the gifts and graces and skills and talents and blessings that God has already poured out upon us. What has God done to prepare and protect you as individuals and as a Church? How have you celebrated these things? How might you celebrate them better? How are you making use of these things? How might you make better use of them?

What does it mean to be God's "pleasant planting" today? *Our challenge as Christians is to be both faithful and fruitful*, trusting the guidance of God and sharing his

love and grace with the world. We have a responsibility to do what we can to restore the church walls that are crumbling and support the watchtowers that are in danger of toppling. We can begin with a focus on justice instead of hostility, following the example of Jesus Christ.

For many years, justice meant "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth." But Jesus says, "If anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also ... Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you" (Matthew 5:38-42). The justice of Jesus does not include the bloody gouging of an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. Instead, it is the way of nonviolence -- the refusal to hit back when a person strikes you on the cheek, hurting them in the same way that they hurt you. In addition, Jesus asks us to create a more just and fair society by the practice of radical generosity -- sharing our coats and cloaks with those in need and giving to everyone who begs from us.

We begin with justice and move on to righteousness, which means being in a right relationship with God and the people around us. Righteousness used to mean, "Love your neighbor and hate your enemy." But Jesus says, "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven" (Matthew 5:43-45). Being a fruitful Christian means pursuing a right relationship with both friends and enemies and doing this through offers of love instead of hatred. We attempt this not because we are particularly loving, graceful, or wonderful people, but because we want to be children of our Father in heaven -- children of the one who "makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good" (v. 45).

Turn the other cheek. Practice radical generosity. Love your enemies. Pray for those who persecute you. These are difficult spiritual practices, truly challenging approaches to justice and righteousness. But as we follow Jesus along this path, we restore the Christian walls that are crumbling and the towers that are in danger of toppling. We allow ourselves to be nurtured by the Lord who has planted us in a fertile spot and given us the care we need to become good fruit.

The prophet Isaiah wants us to know that God expects us to live faithful and fruitful lives. The vineyard of the Lord will not be preserved if it does not produce good grapes. "For the vineyard of the LORD of hosts is the house of Israel," concludes Isaiah, "and the people of Judah are his pleasant planting; he expected justice, but saw bloodshed; righteousness, but heard a cry!" (v. 7).

Like the house of Israel and the people of Judah, we are God's "pleasant planting." When God looks down on us from the top of his watchtower, he expects to see justice, not hostility and division, and to hear words of righteousness, not a cry. Only then will the sounds of praise and blessing be heard, assuring us that God is with us. Only then will the church be a place where grace and love and mercy and welcoming and growth can be found.