

Sermon-8/15/10 Newport Pres. Church  
“When Jesus Gets Grumpy”  
Luke 12:49-56

When I first looked at the passages the lectionary scheduled for this Sunday, I did a bit of head scratching. Pastors love to preach nice, comforting sermons filled with hope and good vibes. Look at the choices for this Sunday. The Isaiah passage says God wants to destroy his vineyard, who Isaiah says is Israel and Judah. “I will remove its hedge, and it shall be devoured.” He goes on to say, “I will make it a waste.” Better skip that one.

Then there was the passage from Hebrews, which we didn’t even read today. The author was describing the ordeals people of faith have had to endure down through the years. “Others were tortured. . .Others suffered mocking and flogging. . They were stoned to death, they were sawn in two. . .” I remember being in high school when I first came across that passage. Reading about some who were sawn in two really gave me the willies! But preach on it? Not me.

Finally there was the passage in Luke’s gospel. Jesus comes across as anti-family values. He talks about how he will cause conflicts between fathers and sons, daughters and mothers, not to mention in-laws. This was almost as bad as when he said later in Luke, “Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters. . .cannot be my disciple.”

What to do? When in doubt, go with the gospel. So Luke it is. The great Indian saint, Mahatma Gandhi, once said “There are seven sins in the world: wealth without work, pleasure without conscience, knowledge without character, commerce without morality, science without humanity, worship without sacrifice, and politics without principle.”

That is a very helpful list. The gospel lesson for today focuses on the sin of worship without sacrifice. It is not an easy message. William Sloane Coffin was not impressed with those churches who try to woo members by offering great programs to enrich their lives. He said in a sermon, “I don’t see how you attract people to the Christian faith by appealing to their basic selfishness and self-centeredness and end up with the religion of Jesus. Jesus just doesn’t do that sort of thing.” Boy is that true!

Our passage for today is a great example of how Jesus promotes being one of his disciples. He is on his way to Jerusalem and a confrontation with the religious authorities there. He suspects that confrontation will not be easy. He is pretty sure it won’t end well for him. He is talking with his disciples and then with the crowds in our passage.

Basically he comes across as incredibly grumpy. Certainly he must have been experiencing a whole lot of stress. In fact he even says so. He talks about the “baptism” he is facing. We know he means the cross when he says that. “I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what stress I am under until it is completed.” We can only imagine.

Then Jesus asks his disciples a question. “Do you think I have come to bring peace to the earth?” I suspect the disciples hope the answer is “Yes.” That is exactly what we all want.

Didn't Luke promise that at the beginning of the gospel when the angels say God will bring peace through Jesus?

Instead Jesus says, "No!" If you follow me you are going to experience conflict and division, even among your own family. Then he turns to the crowd and says, Come on. Figure it out. You can read the signs in the weather. Why can't you interpret the signs of the present time? Why can't you see that for God's reign to be realized there is going to be some conflict?

Sometimes being a follower of Jesus means one has to take unpopular stands. Making serious commitments is just like that. I remember when Sandy and I were getting married. I had a group of very close friends who were a bit demanding. They wanted me to free up time for them and were more than a little jealous of Sandy. My time with her was taking away from the time I spent with them. Eventually I had to make a choice as to where my primary allegiance lay. It sounds obvious, and it is, but it was still not easy. It caused some conflict with my friends, but they eventually got over it.

So, too, being serious about being a disciple of Jesus may, and probably will or should, cause some tension with our relationships with the culture's values and priorities, with some of the decisions our government makes, and sometimes even with our families.

Will Willimon tells the story of a baptism he performed while he was the campus pastor at Duke. He baptized a graduate student from China who had gone through a dramatic conversion experience. Willimon was proud of his role in bringing another person to Christ. He brought along his camera and took a picture of the student standing by the font.

Willimon said the student was a bit reticent to have his picture taken. Will thought he must have been too shy. "But," says Willimon, "on the way out of the parking lot one of his friends said, 'I don't know that you will need to give him those pictures to send back home to his family. They have assured him that if he does this, he could never come back home. They will definitely disown him. Furthermore, his scholarship to the university is being supported by the Chinese government, and he is fairly sure that once this word gets out, he will lose all of his funding to study here.'"

There are Christians all over the world causing conflict, or experiencing persecution, because of their faith stand. What stand do we need to take today in this country? Gay marriage? Reforming immigration? Divestment from companies like Caterpillar for their support of Israel destroying Palestinian homes in the West Bank? Standing up against the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan? Saying no to torture?

Surely we would risk conflict with some of our friends, maybe some in this church, and possibly even a family member if we took a faith-based stand on any of those issues. I am not suggesting there is one right Christian stand on those divisive topics. Many of you know where I stand. I am saying Christians should not shy away from talking about them for fear of causing disharmony.

One commentator said that if life were nice and fair most of the time, then these comments in Luke 12 by Jesus would be very disturbing. But, life is not fair. She says we need conflict, division and even fiery passion to set things right.

Where is there any good news in this? The Bible makes it clear over and over again that there is peace on the other side of conflict, if it is done right. Resurrections follow crucifixions. Life is not finally defeated by death. But we can't get to that peace, with justice, if we don't name the elephant in the room, if we give into what some have called the "cult of harmony."

Was Jesus grumpy when he said what he said in our passage? Probably. It doesn't bother me to say that because it makes Jesus a whole lot more human for me. He could get stressed. He did not always play nice. It also helps us see following him is not always going to be a bed of roses. But, following him is where we can find fire, passion, and abundant life. When we don't let fear control us we can live the free lives of those confident of God's love and grace. It is the only way to make this world a better place, a place where God's reign is possible. Amen