

A HOUSE DIVIDED

TEXT: Luke 12:49-56

Today's reading is not for Sunday School. It is not a reading that comforts. It is not even a reading for polite society. It is a reading that is difficult even for mature Christians, with Jesus' destructive fire, stress, division and judgment. We are probably more comfortable with a Jesus that builds up, comforts, brings unity, and offers grace. But when it comes to Jesus we have to take the whole package.

But what a timely reading it is! With all of the divisiveness present in society these days, it seems like the last thing we need is a gospel text that seemingly encourages more division. Perhaps we need to dig a little more deeply into what Jesus was up to. We are so used to hearing the angel's Christmas song about 'peace on earth' that we tend to forget that at Jesus' dedication, Simeon told his parents that "This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel". It seems to throw our views about Jesus and his mission into question. How can Jesus be the one to bring peace and at the same time be the one who brings division?

It is beyond question that the economic, social, political and religious systems of Jesus' day oppressed the majority of the people. However, if Jesus advocated violent revolution, why would he enter Jerusalem humbly mounted on a donkey instead of riding a magnificent horse? If Jesus expected his disciples to take up arms against their oppressors, why would he rebuke Peter for doing just that? If the "real Jesus" really wanted to overthrow the system of injustice that oppressed so many in his day, why would he allow himself to be crucified? None of that would make any sense.

So what business did a Messiah who was going to sacrifice his life on the cross have talking about bringing division? It seems to me that, while Jesus did not advocate overthrowing the unjust systems of his day, he did not shy away from exposing their injustice. He told parables that pointed out how the religious leaders had enriched themselves at the expense of the people, in direct violation of the Torah they claimed to

uphold. He pointedly confronted them for abandoning the commandments of God when it was convenient, and yet insisting on keeping the letter of the law when it suited them. Jesus did not refrain from directly confronting the “powers that be” of his day.

When anyone has the nerve to look at the way things are and say, “this isn’t right”, it has an unavoidable effect: It divides people. Those who benefit from the status quo will fight tooth and nail to oppose anyone who tries to change things. And they will adamantly keep their blinders firmly in place to avoid having to see the reality of injustice. I believe this is the kind of division Jesus was talking about. He didn’t retreat from a gospel of peace; he just realized that the cost of peace is justice. And he warned his disciples that they would face opposition if they followed him in advocating that kind of peace.

So here’s what I’m thinking. We hear this language of fire and think judgment, and that may be what Jesus wants us to think...for now. But, in reality, the fire of judgment is perhaps about our own inability to save ourselves. The cleansing fire reveals that we need God.

Does any of this have a familiar ring? Does any of this reflect our world here and now? Can we see the divisions that are tearing our world apart all these years later? I think Jesus summed it up pretty well when he insisted that the people who gathered to hear him teach pay attention to more than just the weather. He insisted that the people wake up so they could see that things were not the way God intended. I believe he is telling us the same thing today and the world had better straighten up and listen. We need to take our blinders off and see the injustice, the poverty, and the suffering that is so prevalent all around us. We are surrounded by hurting people. And the first step toward doing something about it is to move out of our comfort zone and take a long, hard look at their suffering

And we don’t have to look very far. We live in a broken, divided world. The most vulnerable among us, the children, are foremost among the victims of the cruelty

suffered in our nation. Not since the holocaust have we seen pictures of children returning from their first school day of the year to empty houses after the parents have been arrested and removed by ICE agents. Never before have we seen children and small babies locked in cages not knowing if they will ever see their parents again. All of this because we cannot fill the divide between white supremacists and people of color.

Every day brings more news of gun violence in our cities and towns. It ranges from neighbors angered by some slight, gangs vying for control of a neighborhood, a few bad apples in law enforcement using force when restraint is needed, and deranged shooters who have no trouble accessing AK-47s and other means of mass killings. All of this because we cannot fill the divide between weak lawmakers and the dollars they receive from the NRA.

We live under the constant threat of nations whose leaders believe that the acquisition and build-up of nuclear weapons gives them status and power in a fractured world. While our own lawmakers are too befuddled to fill the divide between those who think rationally and those who do not.

In our communities we walk around the huddled homeless at our storefronts; we sweep through their campsites and chase them out with no place to go, but refuse to fund the resources to help them with the social services to regain their lives and their dignity. The divide cannot be filled until we, as citizens, recognize each one of these as a child of God.

And, goodness knows, our church is not beyond the divisions of humanity. In a recent op-ed article it was noted that “the church today still struggles with opposition from without and divisions within. Christians today are suffering persecution in many parts of the world, and are under pressure to mute their witness in many other places. If we are to do Christ’s work, we must expect opposition. Ordination of homosexuals, abortion, stem cell research, and military service are only a few of the dividing lines.

Unfortunately, we also generate conflict within the church by fighting over such trivia as the color of the sanctuary carpet.”

Jesus tells us: *I came to set fire to the world.* But that doesn't mean he wants us to build his kingdom by fire and sword. Jesus was, is and always will be the embodiment of divine love. As he has told us over and over, his kingdom is not of this world. His call to arms is a call to unconditional love. The conflict he predicts is not a territorial struggle or even a philosophical spat. The conflict will come between those who accept and follow Jesus and those who reject him...Sometimes casually, sometimes contemptuously, often violently.

At best, we Christians have had a very spotty record of settling our differences with love. Perhaps, like Adam, we are tempted to usurp the powers of God by passing judgment, all of which flies in the face of Christ's very specific charge to us – we are to build the kingdom by loving God and neighbor.

Christians are to be courageous, not bellicose. We are not latter day scribes and Pharisees spoiling for a fight over doctrine. Christ does not keep score by territory conquered, theological arguments won or even by the size of the congregation. We are responsible for serving him and proclaiming him. That means we love and forgive, and then love and forgive some more. To most that's not easy. To many it's just crazy. But to those of us who aspire to live in Christ, it is a joy, a preview of the serenity of being one with God.

In today's gospel, Jesus is a self-proclaimed troublemaker. But as he shows us over and over, eternal life in the love of Christ is certainly well worth the trouble. Amen.