



SAINT LUKE'S

“CONFLICT AND THE KINGDOM”
PROPER 15C

JEREMIAH 23:23-29

PSALM 82

HEBREWS 11:29-12:2

LUKE 12:49-56

A SERMON BY THE REV. CAROLINE STACEY
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Today's gospel is a glimpse into the heart and mind of Jesus. Jesus has just been explaining that the disciples must be awake and alert for God's inbreaking without warning into the world. He has been describing their upcoming crisis of discipleship. Today, Jesus talks about his own vocational struggle and crisis. First, there is the political and national dimension. Jesus reads the signs of the times - and he expects others to as well. Jesus has seen the nationalistic fervor breaking out in Judea against Rome; Jesus sees the increasingly desperate and violent suppression by Rome of rebellions and dissenters; Jesus sees the growing hostility to his own ministry among the powers that be and senses his own crisis is drawing nearer. For Jesus, God and politics are connected. Not in the sense that God supports one political party or national agenda over another. God and politics are connected for Jesus in that God's loving purpose and call to us works through, and within and above and beneath human activity. Some theologians¹ believe Jesus understood himself to be the final agent of God's judgment and the new kingdom on earth.

Do you think I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division. Division and conflict will be

¹ eg. *Albert Schweitzer (The Quest of the Historical Jesus, 1906) and in our own day, Bruce Chilton*

inevitable². The urgency of Jesus' words and his frustration make sense if this is how Jesus understands his mission: bringing fire, purifying the earth ahead of God's judgment. The division Jesus brings is part of God's coming which compels choice, and will divide households and families.

There is a very personal dimension for Jesus too. *I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what stress I am under until it is completed!* There is outer conflict and inwardly too, Jesus is conflicted. Jesus believes his calling is to inaugurate God's redemptive kingdom of justice but at the same time, Jesus doesn't want to bring suffering upon his own people. We see Jesus' full humanity today. Jesus is exasperated and out of patience with everyone, including his disciples and the crowds. This is not gentle Jesus, meek and mild. Jesus is boiling over today with frustration and edgy, jumpy energy. So much so that Jesus calls today's crowd – those who care enough to come out and hear him - *Hypocrites*. He also calls some of the Scribes and Pharisees hypocrites³ at various times⁴. They portray one thing on the surface and another beneath. Jesus says that the crowd should be able to understand these things

² *By this interpretation, when God's kingdom doesn't come through his ministry, on the Cross Jesus will experience the agony of defeat: my God my God why have you forsaken me? Jesus believes he has failed. Maybe he totally misunderstood his mission and role. It was all for nothing; a waste.*

³ *Eg. Mt. 15:7; 23:13,15,23,25,27,29; Mk.7:6*

⁴ *Greek lit. "an interpreter from underneath." Actors in ancient Greek theater wore large masks of the character they were playing, and interpreted the story from underneath their masks.*

as easily as they can forecast a storm brewing in the sky. As though people willfully choose not to understand what they are quite able to see. Jesus is finding that loving God is one thing but loving these people is another. (*Abba*, I love you but these people are driving me crazy!) Why is everything moving so slowly? Underneath his exasperation, Jesus also knows that he is the one who will be baptized with fire first as he approaches his own crucifixion.

I find Jesus' choices in his turmoil today instructive. Jesus accepts conflict and recognizes it is inevitable. Personally I hate conflict and avoid it when I can but we can't always avoid it. None of us can. When conflict arises, I tend to assume that someone, somewhere (quite possibly me) has made a mistake. Either the idea is wrong or maybe the timing or the communication was off. Jesus doesn't assume that conflict is a sign of a mistake or that conflict is avoidable if only humans were more compassionate, better communicators or smarter.

Jesus seems to think that change and transformation into God's kingdom is difficult and conflict is a necessary struggle on the way to transformation for us and the world. Jesus has no illusions here. For Jesus,

conflict is a sign that he is doing what he is meant to be doing, and the transformation is painful and some will choose not to participate. But for those who do engage the gospel, the conflict and struggle - not least within ourselves - is necessary and good, rather than the opposite. Conflict can indicate growth.

If we look at the pattern of his ministry, Jesus prepares himself for conflict and daily demands by times of prayer and retreat throughout. This anchors him. There are many times Jesus goes off to pray. This seems to be especially true at moments of desolation - after the death of John the Baptist for instance⁵. We know there are times Jesus doesn't want to move forward on the path he is on: "Gethsemane moments"⁶. Yet after these times of prayer, Jesus is able to move forward.

Jesus' tenacity is also an inspiring example. Jesus doesn't walk out on the task before him. Whenever we are tempted to give in to our frustration or disappointment and walk away we might think of Jesus. We can always quit tomorrow. But for today, we keep trying because once we quit (a situation or a relationship) we often can't go back. An opportunity is lost, a door is closed. We might miss something wonderful just around the corner. Most importantly,

⁵ Mt. 14:12-13 cf. Mk.6:30-31; Lk.9:10-11

⁶ Matthew 26:36; Mark 14:32

frustrated as we may be, God may be calling us to be right where we are. Agitated though he is, Jesus is exactly where God calls him to be.

Jesus' full humanity connects with our own. Jesus' frustration is actually a gospel encouragement to us so we may be reassured that we are never alone in our struggles. The greater the struggle, the more Jesus' life speaks to our own. Jesus' Spirit dwells with us and within the church's life to strengthen and reassure us, and help us move us forward in our own callings and discipleship.

AMEN

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