

“Divided Houses” Luke 12: 49-56 Rev. Janet Chapman 8/14/22

There is a common wedding called the Unity Candle and often during wedding rehearsals, I explain the symbolism of the candle ceremony. I share that if the couple chooses to do so, after lighting the larger middle candle together, they can then blow out the 2 side candles signifying the two individuals becoming one. One guest admitted in surprise, “Oh I always thought that meant no more fiery fights.” Oh, if only that were the case! Marital and familial fights sometimes become even more intense after the wedding ceremony than before. In today’s scripture, we find Jesus talking about bringing fiery division into relationships. If truth be told, pastors and laypeople alike cringe when they see this text as the assigned lectionary text for the upcoming Sunday. We can’t help but wonder how the Master Teacher who tells a parable of reconciliation between father and prodigal son can be the same Teacher who sets parents against their children and children against their parents? Did Jesus not give blessings of peace to the sick whom he healed? Did he not teach his followers to bring greetings of peace as they traveled the country to share his good news? From the very beginning of Jesus’ life, the angels proclaim peace on earth at his birth; yet now we are given vignettes of domestic dispute that seem void of all family values. In light of his own example and the testimony of his preaching, what can these words of division possibly mean?

To begin with, Luke gives us a hint of what is to come when baby Jesus is presented to the elder Simeon at the temple, who says to Mary, he will “be a sign that generates opposition.” What a thing to say about a baby! In our text, Jesus gives us a hint of what’s going on as he admits he is stressed out. Vs. 50 says “I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what stress I am under until it is completed! Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth?” Way back in chapter 9, Luke notes that Jesus has set his face towards Jerusalem which indicates he knows he is on a path of disruption, conflict and very possibly death. Most recently, he rebukes James and John for wanting to bring down fire on unwelcoming Samaritans and now he proclaims he can’t wait to bring down fire himself. We can almost hear James and John complaining, “How come you get to do it when we didn’t?” Jealousy, anger, desire for revenge and resistance to change can all consume us in the face of the gospel, to the point that we find ourselves fighting against those whom Jesus welcomes.

The fire Jesus calls down is a fire he takes upon himself as well – it is a “baptism by fire” which has him stressed out because it involves his own suffering and death, voluntarily endured, rather than some holocaust which is vindictively imposed. Stress, as some of us know, is a powerful motivator not always for the good. One of the purposes of this past sabbatical was to decompress from negative stress in order to be a more effective pastor and leader. A story is told of a very stressed executive who was juggling way too many responsibilities for his own good. Every day on his way to work, he passed a mental hospital where he stopped to watch one of the patients going thru the motions of winding up and pitching an imaginary ball. A friend asked the executive what he found so interesting about the patient’s performance. “Well,” said the executive, “if things keep on going the way they are, I’ll be there some day catching for that guy, and I want to become well-versed on his curve balls.”

In Jesus’ case, it is not that he is headed to a mental hospital, although some may disagree. The fire which Jesus brings to fruition in relationships is not a fire that incinerates but it is a fire that cleanses. In order to understand this, Sally Smith Holt notes that we need to review the familial relationships that Jesus mentions. Father and son, mother and daughter, mother-in-law and daughter-in-law were all duty-based relationships in the ancient world. Relationships that were based solely on affection were more likely to be found in mother-son, father-daughter, brother-sister relationships, because these involved a freedom not as accessible as the ones Jesus identifies. The ones Jesus names could, of course, involve mutual affection, but they always involved duty and obligation. The relationship between mother and daughter was always duty-based first, mother modelling life for daughter and daughter following in footsteps of mother. The connection between father and son was connected to the obligation of father teaching son how to be respected and in turn the son honoring the father by following suit. Additionally, in that culture, the eldest son would eventually inherit his father’s position and property. Thus, the eldest would remain in the household, while younger brothers would move nearby as they came of age. The eldest was expected to learn the details associated with his future position and would naturally feel both the honor and burden of birth order. The mother and daughter relationship most likely refers to an unmarried daughter while she still lives in her father’s house. The unmarried daughter would be especially obligated to

keep her honor, and while a woman could bring shame upon her family in a lot of ways, an unmarried daughter had the specific duty to remain chaste, keeping her worth as a potential wife. As for the daughter-in-law, it was also common for a new wife to move into the family home of her husband. The marriage was viewed as a union created to serve the interests of the kinship group, and the new wife was obligated to maintain her marriage contract in a manner that edified the whole group. All these things played out in the fiery words Jesus speaks in our text. They are the duty-based relationships that are the target of Jesus' impassioned warnings about coming division.

Perhaps Jesus is urging listeners to move beyond the duty which defines such relationships and thereby shake up societal expectations. The message Jesus brings upsets the order, it is meant to disquiet and disturb, keeping the theme of upheaval and protest alive which is found throughout the Gospel of Luke. Duty-based relationships are shaken up by his words and a new freedom becomes possible when obligations, which are only associated with duty, are cast aside and thrown off. Yes, families are broken, but in that brokenness, space is created for another kind of order to emerge. Here we find something beautiful growing out of, and from the suffering, that accompanies being broken. I visited a teenager once when I worked as a CASA volunteer who had a sign on her door which said, "Enter at your own risk." It is a fair warning to anyone who chooses to walk in the path of Jesus. Brokenness can offer followers a step closer to wholeness. The kingdom or realm that Jesus brings is one of division and hardship, and that division reaches us at a very personal level. It will be felt within our most private spaces and intimate relationships. In the past decade, we have seen such factions grow even wider and stronger as family members argue over politics, economics, health practices and such. This division can cause us great suffering as families are broken and divided. But can beauty and wholeness emerge from such division, conflict, and suffering? In a story from the Hindu faith, a Hindu deity, Ganesha is portrayed as an elephant head with one broken tusk. He holds that broken, imperfect tusk in one of his hands. The Hindu tradition teaches that it is with the broken tusk that Ganesha could write down the Mahabharata, one of the most beloved texts in Hinduism. Only with brokenness could completion be found. Only through suffering, do truth and beauty emerge.

In typical style for Luke, a theme of liberation also emerges here along with upheaval. A new and much more important sense of duty emerges when individuals let go of the obligation-related connections which have enslaved them. They are cleansed and freed to follow Jesus in ways that weren't previously possible, beyond marital, familial and even national boundaries. This liberating step away from broken structures and toward completion occurs because a sense of duty shifts significantly. The focus on the work of the kingdom of God is the most important work we do and it is that work that leads to wholeness.

Enter at your own risk, Jesus says, for households will be divided. God's realm will be a radical commonwealth in which those who insist on keeping its inheritance "within the family" will find themselves at odds with other family members whose vision is infused by the cleansing fire and expanding grace of Jesus' radical love. Until we get beyond tribal and national understandings of peace on our own terms, the peace on earth proclaimed by angels will remain a peace that surpasses all understanding. Amen.