

Luke 12: 49-56 “Is It Civil War?” Rev. Janet Chapman 8/25/19

We watched the horror unfold again this week as we shook our heads saying, “Not again, too soon, its got to stop, enough is enough” – all phrases which bleed out of from our the depths of our hearts as this time it was flames leaping across dry vegetation and folks in Jones Valley and Bella Vista scrambled to evacuate as quickly as possible. Years of heat and dry conditions created tinderboxes so that this week, once again, we watched in horror as one of our neighbor’s homes burns before our very eyes. It took only the tiniest spark to ignite a withering blaze. Once again, firefighters were forced to contain the inferno before it spread beyond those 3 homes and they did a remarkable job. I was in Grocery Outlet on Churn Creek between meetings when the red alert went out – the woman behind me asked where Bella Vista was? I pointed the best I could, and she said, “That isn’t near Jones Valley is it, you see, we just moved there from Paradise?” Oh dear God, you need to go home now, I breathed, and said I would be praying. Fire can be so savagely destructive and merciless, utterly indifferent to the misery and chaos that it leaves as its aftermath.

Therefore, the words we hear from Jesus this morning are troubling to say the least. Take a poll – not many people would identify Jesus as the “burn-it-all-down” kind of guy because the Jesus we know was moved by the poor and hungry, the homeless and ill-clothed, the desperate and persecuted. We would be sorely mistaken if we thought God brought the Mountain fire or any of the fires we have endured as some sort of punishment. That would be mischaracterizing scripture, removing it from its context and diminishing God to some vindictive Being who operates by our definitions not by God’s. No, this text has to do with how God confronts our practices, how God tries to shed blazing light on the dark methods in which we organize our world and seek to control it, how God wakes us up from our comfortable

apathy concerning how the world treats the vulnerable and suffering. God, working within God's beloved child Jesus, isn't content with temporarily reducing the suffering of a few individuals like the poor, homeless or oppressed but asks the question that makes all of us a bit nervous, even angry. "Why are there so many hungry people? So many homeless? So many sick? So many fires? So many shootings?" Jesus came to see and believe that we have organized the world in the wrong way, contrary to God's dream for us. Jesus came to change the logic of the world and that most definitely leads to conflict.

None of us enjoy conflict, whether it is in our families, communities, even our churches. As the political climate becomes increasingly polarized, we see our own churches desperately trying to figure out what it means to worship together, to fellowship and love one another, traipsing through the land mines which could bring us all down. Such conflict arose in that blockbuster movie a few years ago, Captain America: Civil War, which pitted Marvel heroes Captain America and Tony Stark against one another. Their conflict, for one, was generational, where the older Stark was pitted against the relatively younger Steve Rogers. You see, Steve is younger in actual time lived, because he was awakened from frozen, suspended animation. Jesus tells us there will be division, "father against son, and son against father, mother against daughter, and daughter against mother." Some of you have shared similar conflicts in your own families and not always are the older ones opposed to change and progression; sometimes it is the younger who want to cling to the old ideologies and adamantly reject newer understandings of scripture. Sometimes it is too easy to forget, however, that we all share a common enemy and that is fear; fear of decline, fear of the unknown, fear of you name it.

When we identify those fears, name them and share them with one another, the fear diminishes.

Jesus's words seem to be telling us about our reality. Things get worse before they get better. It is a common thread in conflict. Some of you remember the conflict between loggers and environmentalists over the endangered spotted owl on the West Coast. Fish and Game discovered an additional threat to the owl which increased its vulnerability and that is the barred owl, one of its own relatives. For the past several decades, the barred owl has migrated westward rapidly. It used to live exclusively east of the Mississippi but now resides in our own backyard, competing for the same food as the spotted owls but the barred owls are bigger, more aggressive and adaptable. So Fish and Game have been doing studies for the past 5 years which seem to indicate that when barred owls are captured and humanely relocated, the spotted owl is given a fighting chance at survival. Like the spotted owl, Jesus draws our attention to the fact that sometimes our greatest conflict comes not from outside culture, but from other Christians. Yet it took the spotted owls near extinction before action was taken.

When conflict happens, when we find ourselves "under stress" as Jesus starts out in our text, we have to accept that sometimes things get worse before they get better. Brian McLaren explains how he got a call asking him to come to Charlottesville to join a group of clergy praying for their city two years ago. He was told that the town was slated to be the capital of the next Confederacy and the upcoming Aug. 18 rally would include KKK, militia, and many white supremacists ushering in the new reign. The group explained there would be many folks, African Americans, Latin Americans, immigrants, and such who were terrified, and so the clergy planned a counter-protest to stand for peace and love. The problem was they simply couldn't

get any white male clergy to attend; they had white females, they had black clergy, they had Latino clergy, but they really needed a white man. What could he do? Leaving his home in Maryland, not telling his wife the details for fear it would cause her anxiety, he headed off to Virginia. He speaks of it now as one of the scariest experiences of his life. He had never been around that many Confederate and Nazi flags, guns, and violent rhetoric in his life. When he returned to his home church, the pastor happen to mention in passing that Brian had been in Charlottesville during the crisis. An older gentleman in the congregation came up to Brian after worship and got very close to his face saying, "I don't like what you did; I have no respect for you that you went where you didn't belong and got involved in that mess." The man was livid and chewed Brian up one side and down the other. In reading our scripture today, Brian remarks, "I remember how I felt that weekend and how I felt in my own home church to realize that Jesus' work as a peacemaker often makes things worse before they get better."

When we address the underlying injustices in our world, the way our culture is organized and the answers to the whys which plague us, rarely will anyone say, "Hey, thanks for telling us. I really needed to hear that." No one enjoys conflict and rarely do folks want to hear what makes them uncomfortable or challenges them to change. Jesus says, "Don't think following in my footsteps will be a bed of roses; there won't be rainbows in the sky and laughter everywhere." Jesus was not a pacifier but an agitator; he wasn't a silencer but one who empowers; he wasn't a placater but a firey preacher who could shake the very rafters of the temple. As Prince of Peace, he knew that you can't bring real peace without bringing justice, that kind of justice I spoke of last week that is heavily steeped in power. Actually, if you think about it, all of this started even before Jesus was even born as Mary sang, "He has

brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.” (Lk. 1: 52-53) Jesus came to change the deep logic of the world and only love will change that logic. Jake Owensby states that love is the fire that Jesus has come to bring to the earth. Jesus is that fire-starter that burns through the world’s reliance on dominance and greed, that breaks down our desires to hold tightly to what we believe to be ours so no one else will get ahead of us. Love will ultimately burn away the kind of thinking that drives wedges between us. It won’t happen overnight; it will take as long as it takes to burn through us and in us. Jesus knew things had to heat up before people would wake up.

Things will get worse before they get better...but they will get better. In the meantime, we can take a hint from Captain America: Civil War and come together to fight a common foe, the rise of hate and the loss of love, heightened fear and diminished compassion. And may the fires of God’s love lead the way. Amen.