

Isaiah 5:1-7  
Psalm 80:1-2, 8-18  
Hebrews 11:29-12:2  
Luke 12:49-56

When I was still just a small child, my Daddy explained to me what integrity is. Integrity, he said, is doing what you know to be the right thing to do when no one is watching and no one will ever find out. I've never forgotten that definition and more than once in my lifetime, his voice has stopped me in my tracks and charged me to reconsider my actions. The gospels have plenty to say about integrity.

As we wade into the gospel reading for this morning, we are once again faced with a missing passage that sheds light on what we heard this morning. The lectionary has left out Luke 12:39-48. Last Sunday, we took a look at the scripture passage in Luke that describes Jesus telling his followers that they need to be prepared for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour. The passage that immediately follows that one is the one that is omitted. In the omitted passage, Jesus describes in some detail the wrath that will befall the slave who is not only unprepared, but has abused and mistreated his fellow slaves in the absence of the master. When the master arrives, the slave who was not only unprepared for the master's return, but had misused his authority in the master's absence, will be severely punished. It wasn't that he was unaware of what was expected of him. He knew exactly what he was supposed to be doing, but he took advantage of the trust placed in him and did the opposite. He lacked integrity. Jesus says his punishment was severe. It is within this passage that we hear the familiar verses: "From everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required: and from the one to whom much has been entrusted, even more will be demanded."

We have been given much and much has been entrusted to us. The demands on us are great. We know what Jesus' mission is. He has told us and tells us repeatedly through the gospel lessons that we read on a regular basis. More will be demanded of us than from those to whom this trust has not been given. When we identify ourselves as Christians, we agree to take on that trust and that obligation. Every day of our lives, we need to be asking ourselves, "How am I doing?" at living into the mission that Jesus has entrusted to us. Being a Christian is not a 'free pass.' It's not a 'get out of jail free' card in a giant game of monopoly. It's doing the hard and gritty daily work of bringing the kingdom of God into the reality of our own daily lives and the daily lives of all those around us. It's not easy. And it's not without controversy. Christianity is controversial now and it was definitely controversial in Jesus' day.

Just in case his followers had not yet figured it out, Jesus announces this morning that: "I have come 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!" This is one of the few times in the gospels that Jesus shows us his very human side. He knows what's coming. Can you imagine how much stress each of us would be under if we knew what was coming down the pike at us? It is such a blessing that we cannot see into the future. We have enough trouble managing the stress that we can see. Imagine what it must be like to be able to see it all!!

"I have come to bring fire," Jesus says. Stop and think for a minute what we know about the nature of fire in scripture. We sometimes jump to the conclusion that fire is for destruction only as the admonition that those who do not welcome the kingdom on the last day will be 'thrown into the fire!' That's one way of thinking about fire. But consider Moses and the burning bush. The fire was God and it did not consume the bush, but spoke to Moses. And consider the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt. They were guided out of that land and toward the Promised Land by a cloud by day and by a pillar of fire by night. And consider the source of the Ten Commandments. With thunder and lightning they were given to Moses to give to the chosen people in the wilderness. On the day of Pentecost, a tongue of fire came to rest on the heads of each one to whom the Holy Spirit had been given. Biblically, we are reminded that God himself is represented by fire. And we see that fire is so often used as an instrument of cleansing and refinement.

So Jesus says to them, "I have come to bring fire!" In other words, "I have come to bring God." And surely Jesus has come to teach us about God, to show us the nature of God, to share with us the will and intention of God, to help us experience the love of God through him. Jesus has come to bring fire and it will cost him plenty.

When Jesus tells us that he has come to bring division, not peace, his statement is not prescriptive, but descriptive. He's not telling us that his intention is to bring division. He's telling us that division is what is going to happen as he seeks to fulfill his mission. There will be a lot of people...people in power...who do not like it. And what is his mission? He tells his hometown crowd in Nazareth when he finishes reading the passage from Isaiah. His mission is to: bring good news to the poor; proclaim release to the captives; recovery of sight to the blind and to let the oppressed go free. In short, his job is to upset the current social order. He's going to turn everything on its head. The poor will be elevated and the rich will be sent empty away. Remember Mary's Magnificat? The outcasts will be welcomed. The sick will be healed. The blind will be able to see. Those who are first will be last.

Well, if you're first in line...you don't want to hear that you're going to be last. Take a look at the divisions that Jesus describes. They are along generational lines: fathers and sons; mothers and daughters; etc. The older generation holds the power and people with power do not relinquish it voluntarily. Unless there is a societal structure for the peaceful transfer of power, it does not happen without turmoil. The powerful never relinquish power voluntarily. It has to be wrested away from them. Jesus didn't set up these rules. This is the way humans have developed their societies over millions of years. Jesus is simply stating what will happen when he introduces the kingdom of God...what will happen when he fulfills his mission. There will be division. Not everyone is going to like it or embrace it.

Consider the original audience for whom the gospel of Luke was written. These are first century Jews who have decided that Jesus is the Messiah they have been promised. Many of them have had to break from their own families in order to follow Jesus because there are many faithful Jews who believe that Jesus is a charlatan. Here he is...a homeless, uneducated, vagrant...wandering around the countryside talking about God and the coming of God's kingdom and healing a few people here and there. What is the older, established generation to think? This man...this Jesus...this homeless vagrant...is luring our children away from the flock that is faithful to God...faithful to the ten commandments...in covenant with God since the days of exile in Egypt. Jesus is messing everything up! Jesus is teaching a 'new' message and many of the faithful Jews believe it is a false message and that Jesus is a false prophet. They are fighting desperately to hang on to the younger generation and have them stay within the fold. It's a battle. A battle royal.

We can all understand what a division and what turmoil Jesus must have caused if we consider how we would react if some unknown itinerant preacher suddenly announced that Jesus was obsolete and he...or she...was the new Messiah...the one all the Christians have been waiting for. We can all understand how we would react if someone walked into St. Paul's, performed a miracle or two, and told us that the end of the world was imminent and he...or she...was the pathway to God. In all likelihood, we would be tempted to run that so-and-so out of town on a rail!!

And Jesus chastises them for not being able to read the signs of the time. You can read the weather and the appearance of the earth, he says, but you can't read the signs of the present time. Jesus can see what's happening. He can see the divisions growing and he understands why they are happening and what they mean. He is frustrated that his followers can see what's going on, but can't figure out why it is happening or what it all means.

Jesus could ask us the same questions. Can you not see the signs of the present time? Do you not know how to interpret the present time and what's happening in it? Do you not know what it all means?

When division came in Jesus' time it meant that people were being asked to take a side...to either remain in the Jewish fold or step out and follow Jesus. To either remain a gentile or step into the fold that Jesus was creating. Neutrality was not an option. Jesus charged them...and us...to read the signs of the times and to decide where they wanted to be. On the sidelines was not an option. And it isn't an option for us today. We either believe in Jesus and Jesus' mission or we do not. We either want to help usher in the kingdom of God or we do not. We either support what is required of us in our vows of Holy Baptism or we do not. There's no middle ground. Being a Christian is not easy. It is not convenient. It is not always popular. But when we 'Stand Up! Stand Up! for Jesus' we have gotten off the bench and have taken a side.

Thanks be to God!

AMEN.