

“A Tough Call” 8-14-16 CHC

Isaiah 5:1-7

Luke 12:49-56

I returned to the University of Colorado my sophomore year, my life set in a new direction. Over the summer I had made a conscious decision to follow Christ as the central guide and focus of my life. Attending church with my family since birth I had never made a solid commitment to God. Finally I decided to make the tough call. Christ would have my full attention. The direction of my life would be his to guide. I did not know what that would look like but I announced to God my willingness and will to do so. The fork in the road was clear, all in or all out.

Living in a fraternity I found little encouragement or support. Coming back to the fraternity one Sunday morning after church I was met by one person asking why I went and did I get anything out of it, in a mocking spirit. Over time lifestyle choices led me away from fraternal activities and certain values. Comments, some positive, some negative, became routine. I was embracing new relationships and becoming more distanced from those I knew. My time became committed to other things. There was an emerging tension between who I was becoming and the people with whom I lived.

In our text this morning Jesus is underscoring the radical reformation of values the kingdom of God is calling us to live into. He is calling us to embrace this new age embodied in him and to disengage from the world and its values and ways as we have known and lived within them.

This became a tough call for the disciples to not only comprehend, but chose to make. I often wonder if Soren Kierkegaard's observation does not apply to them and us. He writes that “The Bible is very easy to understand. But we Christians are a bunch of scheming swindlers. We pretend to be unable to understand it because we know very well that the minute we understand, we are obliged to act accordingly” (Homiletics Sep.-Oct., p.55).

Be that as it may, Jesus is being very clear about the natural division which will be in play when we take the message of the kingdom seriously. I certainly found that to be true. Such division is characteristic of Jesus ministry, especially in this case as he continues to focus on the coming end-time judgement.

Rome hated Christianity. So does ISIS. So do some in our culture. I don't know if people hate Christianity so much as a caricature of Jesus as represented by his followers. Too many Romans witnessed families torn in two because someone made a commitment to Christ within a family. People found themselves having to make the tough call to love Christ over kin in many cases. Christians early on found that the essence of Christianity is clearly a choice for loyalty to Christ over other loyalties that press for our attention in this world. That hasn't changed.

In this sense Jesus talks of bringing “fire to the earth” and couples it with the baptism with which he is to be baptized. He says to them, “What stress I am under until it is completed”. Baptism means being submerged. So Jesus is saying in effect, as Barclay paraphrases it, “I have a terrible experience through which I must pass; and life is full of tension until I pass through it and emerge triumphantly from it”. The

cross lies before him and only he really understands its meaning and implications. There still lies in the disciples and the peoples' minds a naïve understanding of who Jesus is which adds to the shock value of what he is saying. If the Messiah is expected to be a conqueror and king bringing in a new golden age, such talk of division and judgement makes no sense. Even today we are not prone to entertain and consider the element of judgement inherent within the message of Jesus. I wonder what false notions of Jesus that we carry in our minds. But here it is in full bloom, like it or not.

“Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division!” Jesus is saying that we cannot have fidelity to the truth of his person and message and not find ourselves at odds and sometimes at war with the world. As Paul writes to the Romans in chapter 12:18, “If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, ‘Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord...Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good’”. Judgement for wrongs done is never ours to inflict, but God’s to execute in God’s way and time. It is a matter of the trust Jesus calls us into.

Jesus is inviting us to be open to the possibility of living and dying in a different way. Harriet Tubman, the abolitionist and Underground Railroad conductor, a powerful Christian witness, will be the first African American to be portrayed on the front of a \$20 bill. Born in slavery around 1820 in Maryland, she escaped in 1849 to Philadelphia, returning to the South over a dozen times, assisting hundreds of slaves to freedom. She was nicknamed Moses.

Speaking of her faith, she said, “I always told God, ‘I’m going to hold steady on you, and you’ve got to see me through’” (Christian Century, May 25, 2016, p.19). Daily she risked her life as she followed Christ’s call in her life.

As Christ’s followers, we share in that fire and baptism Jesus went through. As biblical interpreter Brandon Wrencher observes, to be incorporated into the body of Christ is being “bound to Jesus’ body among the least of these, among the enemy, among the foreigner, the hungry, the poor, the prisoner, the sick” (CT, p.56). As we debate being hospitable to refugees we cannot allow ourselves to be led by fear. That is not Christ’s way.

The paradox of sorts is that Jesus, the Prince of Peace, also brings judgement and division. How? He interrupts our understanding of what it means to belong. He transforms the meaning of family. He draws a larger circle than we would and asks us to join him.

What does this mean for us as followers of Christ? Well, allow me to take a stab at it. It means that Jesus is calling us into a new ‘we’. So we might ask as a congregation, “How is God calling us into a new ‘we’? Since Jesus’ love embraces the heart of his call, we see in his earthly ministry that there are no boundaries to that love. As Wrencher puts it, “Boundary-transgressing is at the heart of the peacebuilding to which Jesus calls us”.

Jesus observes what good meteorologists the Palestinians of his day appear to be. Like them, we can see the clouds and determine if it will rain. We can feel the air and look at the horizon and have a sense of a pending tornado. In effect Jesus says, if you can read the sky and interpret the weather, why can’t

you interpret the present times in which you live? You've seen what God is doing through me. People are healed, sins are forgiven, and even the dead have been raised. Are you blind? You should have known by what you have seen that God's rule is at hand and has already begun. As such, you ought to have governed yourselves accordingly. God doesn't impose judgement upon us as much as we do upon ourselves.

I wonder if we are as clueless to what God is doing in our own time, in our world and in our church. Jesus presses on, asking, "And why do you not judge for yourselves what is right?" He refuses to let us off the hook.

He then serves up an example of a person going with his or her accuser to a magistrate in order to get a ruling on the case. On the way make an effort, Jesus says, to settle the case or you may be dragged before the judge and the judge hand you over to the officer and the officer throw you in prison. It won't end well. "I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the very last penny".

Here we have a defendant who has a bad case which will inevitably go against him or her. Barclay makes the point that all of us possess a bad case in the presence of God. But if we are wise, we will recognize who Jesus is and make our peace with God while there is still time (Barclay, *The Gospel of Luke*, p. 175).

There are decisions in life that we cannot afford to put off, especially those pertaining to our relationship with God. Sometimes we have to make the tough call and let go of those things that keep us from doing what we need to do. But that is where we will find our peace with God.

We allow ourselves to be carried away by a multitude of conflicting concerns. We surrender to too many demands, commit to too many projects. We want to please people and help everyone. Sandra Bond Chapman, director of the Center for Brain-Health notes that "multi-tasking is a brain drain that exhausts the mind, zaps cognitive resources and, if left unchecked, condemns us to early mental decline and decreased sharpness. Chronic multi-taskers also have increased levels of cortisol, the stress hormone, which can damage the memory region of the brain" (Homiletics, p.47).

Referring to the frenzy of the activist, Thomas Merton observes that the person's efforts for peace are neutralized because the inner capacity for peace is compromised. We do violence to our inner selves. It kills the root of wisdom which makes work fruitful. The fruitfulness of our work is compromised (Homiletics, p.51).

The fire of the gospel and the invitation to share in Jesus' baptism centers us. We learn that it is not what we do for God that is the driving force, but paying attention to what God is doing in us and leading us to do. The Peacemaker may lead us to do things that create a disturbance to the status quo. We may find that we have to make tough choices in some areas of our lives within that relationship as we say, "We could not, so help us God, do otherwise" (Daniel Berrigan, prophetic peacemaker, *Sojourners*, p.16).

But in the end, all we do is God's work in us done for God's glory. The tough call may not be so tough after all.

