

Aug. 15, 2010

Luke 12:49-56 Bringing Division

⁴⁹"I have come to bring fire on the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! ⁵⁰But I have a baptism to undergo, and how distressed I am until it is completed! ⁵¹Do you think I came to bring peace on earth? No, I tell you, but division. ⁵²From now on there will be five in one family divided against each other, three against two and two against three. ⁵³They will be divided, father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law."

⁵⁴He said to the crowd: "When you see a cloud rising in the west, immediately you say, 'It's going to rain,' and it does. ⁵⁵And when the south wind blows, you say, 'It's going to be hot,' and it is.

⁵⁶Hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of the earth and the sky. How is it that you don't know how to interpret this present time?

So ---- how do we interpret the signs of the present time?

Last week I talked about how some people are interpreting all the wars, earthquakes, storms, and upheaval today as being signs of the End Times. The problem is that people have been reading the signs of the times as heralding the second coming of Christ almost ever since Christ ascended into heaven!

So it's no wonder things have gotten more and more confusing and misleading as the years have gone by, no wonder that we don't know how to interpret the signs of the times.

Last week I also talked about being ready for Christ to come, no matter when it happens or

How it happens---whether he comes to the whole world riding on the clouds or whether he comes to each one of us personally, over and over again, in our hearts.

And then Jesus, after warning us to be ready because he will come like a thief in the night, kind of goes off, it seems like. He sounds very angry, like he just can't put up with ignorance and misunderstanding any more.

People are expecting one kind of Messiah, and he's not it.

They think he's going to throw the Romans out of Israel and establish peace by political means.

And they're wrong. Jesus has done everything he can to show them, tell them, prove to them, that his kingdom is not an earthly kingdom.

He has said it over and over again that the Kingdom of God, the Kingdom of Heaven is near, and still they are thinking about an earthly kingdom.

So he gets fed up. He just wants the whole thing to be over. He wants to get the crucifixion over with and the resurrection accomplished. He sounds like he's pretty much given up that very many people will have any kind of clue what he's about.

So when the one that we think of as the Prince of Peace tells us that he has not come to bring peace, but division instead, it's jarring. It's not what we expect.

And it wasn't what the people then expected, either. They thought that this teacher, this rabbi, was there to teach and heal and perform miracles. Some of them looked to him as the one who would liberate them from the heavy hand of the Roman government.

They certainly didn't expect him to cause division in their own households.

We find this same incident in the gospel according to Matthew as well. Matthew uses even stronger language, quoting Jesus as saying "I have come not to bring peace but a sword" and saying that a man's worst enemy will be found right in his own home!

So where do we get the idea that Jesus Christ is the Prince of Peace when we hear just the opposite from his own lips?

This doesn't seem to fit with the tiny baby we welcomed only last December, with singing about Silent Night and Joy to the World and the angels singing "Peace on earth, good will to men!"

Where did this Not Peace, but Division language come from?

Now, I could just gloss over this and say that some scholars say that this is a redaction---that is, that someone years later somehow had a different way of thinking about Christ, and so these words were added in later, maybe even decades later, for some alternate agenda.

And I guess that's possible. But I prefer to try to understand, because even if someone other than Luke recorded these words, there is some meaning here that we can learn from, some reason that these words were canonized with the rest of the gospel.

So what is the gospel, the good news here?

I believe, actually, that Christ himself did say these words, because of what I see when I look around.

I see wars and conflict and bitter partisanship and prejudice and conspiracy theories. I see people not just disagreeing with each other, but vilifying one another, demonizing each other, accusing each other of horrible agendas and of desiring the destruction of everything we have worked so hard for.

I see anger, and beyond anger, deep-seated resentment and hate. I see a devastating fear behind this anger, fear of the unknown, the unfamiliar, the different.

I see fear of anything that might cause us to change---fear of a change in our way of living, fear that we might be wrong, fear that someone who is different from us might be right.

Fear that the world around us is changing in a way that we might not be able to adapt to.

Another way to say all this is that I see division. Division not only between religions, but within Christianity itself. In fact, it seems to me that the most hard-fought battles are between Christians----

fundamentalist vs liberal, evangelical vs main-line, Modern vs Post-modern.

Christians fight with each other over many issues---- how to be baptized, how to help the needy, how to worship, not to mention issues like abortion and health care and homosexuality and the justification of war.

And as long as we can have honest, civil discussions about these issues and really listen to each other, this conflict can lead to better understanding, improved relationships, and a stronger discipleship. Conflict is not always a bad thing.

Sometimes, though, the conflict comes from standing strong in our discipleship and being rejected by others, or confronted by the powers of this world.

I have a friend who is an Army chaplain---his name is Charlie----Chaplain Charlie, or, as he sometimes says, Charlie Chaplain. Yesterday on Facebook he posted a heartfelt pledge.

All of his life, he says, he has been an activist for peace, and now he finds himself trying to be the spiritual guide for soldiers who have killed and who have seen their buddies killed in combat. He says that many immoral and unethical things have been done, both on the battlefield and off of it.

He finds it hard to speak out against those immoral and unethical acts, given the challenges of combat and the stress the soldiers are under. He wants to be compassionate, but he knows he is there for more than that.

So he pledges to be courageous and speak the truth to the people he is called to minister to, the soldiers in the battalion he is assigned to.

Even if it brings division between him and the soldiers he is serving. Even if it causes an argument. Even if people get upset with him or feel accused and resent it.

Because this is what he feels called to do. To try to bring God's message into the middle of what can sometimes seem like a Godless situation.

To show God's righteousness in places where God does not seem to be.

Charlie has always been very brave, and now he is brave enough to stand up for what is right, to stand up for what is moral and ethical, what is right in the eyes of God even in the midst of war.

I see Jesus in his actions. Because he is doing what Jesus was doing.

Jesus, too, was in a setting where many immoral and unethical things were being done. He was bold to stand up and point them out-----throwing the moneychangers out of the Temple, pointing out the hypocrisy of the Pharisees and the way they put the details of the Law over and above loving their neighbor.

And in this passage, he points out actually very harshly that people know more about the weather than they do about what the Messiah is there to do.

They are familiar with the seasonal weather patterns, but their relationship with God is so weak that they don't even know that the Messiah is standing right in front of them!

They are definitely not ready to answer when Jesus knocks on the door! They don't even hear him knocking!

They are so entrenched in their everyday lives, in their familiar ways of thinking, that they don't even know that something out of the ordinary is happening!

Their fire is out! Jesus says that he has come to bring fire on the earth! Fire doesn't let you be complacent or comfortable. Fire forces you to be watchful, on guard. You have to make sure that it doesn't get out of control, and you also have to pay attention so that it doesn't go out.

Fire has two purposes. It can be destructive, consuming everything in its path, or it can be useful, purifying metals and cleaning up the dead wood.

Officials in Yosemite have found that allowing some fire is very good for the forest, allowing the seeds of the giant sequoia to germinate and clearing out the undergrowth to allow for the growth of a wider diversity of plants.

Fire in our souls can be good for us, too. It can destroy everything that keeps us trapped and in the shadows and allow for new spiritual growth. More light can get in to help us to understand and learn.

Jesus came to bring fire to the earth, to move us along, to purify us and allow the light of God to shine on us more brightly.

This purification and growth does something substantial to us. It can cause us to become very different people. Instead of watching and seeing the same old weather patterns, we might begin to see something very different.

We just might CHANGE!!

And this change is what causes division.

Because some of us give in to change. Some of us actually welcome it!

And some of us resist change, with both heels firmly planted.

When we are called by Jesus Christ to be disciples, our lives radically change. We can find ourselves doing things we never thought we would.

And the change in us, the difference between what the world expects us to be and what we have become leads to division.

“But you’ve never done that before!” you might hear. Or “but people in our family don’t do things like that!” or “People in our family always go into the family business--- you can’t go off and work for a non-profit!” and that causes division between father and son, and mother and daughter.

What Christ is saying is that there is nothing that is more important than following him! Not weather, not family-- --nothing!

The fire comes and burns away our false hopes and our wrong ideas about what Christ came to do. He did not come to smooth everything over and make everything easy and nice.

He came to show us a more daring way to live, a way that costs everything while at the same time giving us everything.

Chaplain Charlie has given up his image of himself as a peace activist, and that was a hard thing to do. He has replaced that image with a truer one. He now knows himself to be a pastor to soldiers, called by God to serve in a particular way to people who have different needs than he ever imagined he would be dealing with.

We have to give up our mistaken images of Christ and replace it with a truer one----Christ who comes to set fire to the earth, fire that purifies us and burns away lies and false idols. Christ who comes to lead us in a new direction that not everyone we love will agree with.

Christ who comes to lead us to the Kingdom of God, if only we will give up everything to follow him.

Amen.