

Peace?

Luke 12: 49-56

Hebrews 11:29 - 2:2

I didn't grow up with Rally Day. I don't know if it's a Southern thing or a Presbyterian thing, but I don't remember any kind of big deal being made of the first day of Sunday School in my churches in Connecticut or Colorado. There was no end-of-summer regrouping of far-flung vacationing parishioners, no church-wide celebration of ecclesiastical education. But even without having had that background I would venture to guess that this is not the kind of scripture reading that the wise preacher would be encouraged to choose to welcome everyone back with. I would think that whether you call it Rally Day, Sunday School Kick Off day, whatever, your scripture should be inspirational, your sermon a go-get-'em kind of message carefully crafted to, well, rally the troops. To get everyone excited about the journey of discipleship and the opportunity to learn and grow in community with each other.

Frankly, though, the readings from the lectionary didn't give me a whole lot to work with. Isaiah 5, which we didn't read, menacingly likens Israel to a crop of wild grapes that have overrun the vineyard and must be ripped out and stomped on, and then burned up just for good measure. The Psalm for the day is its companion, a plea to God to have mercy on the vineyard and its vines, and not rip them out, stomp on them, and burn them up just for good measure. Not great offerings either. From what I've been able to gather, even if today isn't their official end to summer and start of their Sunday school year, most of my colleagues are opting for the only palatable reading for the day, the Hebrews text about all the heroes of the faith, that great cloud of witnesses, and what was accomplished because of their trust in God.

And it's possible that I might come to regret the decision to stick with the gospel reading today, who knows. But just as I've never been a fair-weather friend who will only stick with you through thick, and then abandon you in thin, I've also never been one to shy away from the tough words in scripture, even if I suspect that they were leveled right at me. I'd rather read the stories where God tells us how wonderful we are and patches us back up and puts us on the road again when we fall down, but honestly, we probably deserve to be called 'wild grapes,' and 'fool' and 'hypocrites' sometimes, don't we? I don't like it, but I probably need to hear it.

This is kind of a complex collection of verses, but I think we can save time and cut to the chase and say that what Jesus is forcing us – and I don't think that 'force' is too strong a word in this context – to deal with is the question, is it possible to really be a disciple and blend in; can you be a Christian and not make waves?

What clouds the issue for us is the way he frames the question. He puts it in terms of peace. Up until now we thought peace was a good thing. The angels brought the shepherds tidings of peace the night that Jesus was born, and Zechariah, when his tongue was finally loosened after John was born, said that Jesus would guide our feet in the way of peace. And in the days after the resurrection Jesus came to his confused disciples and greeted them with a blessing of peace. All this time we thought peace was why he came, what he came to give to us and the rest of the world, and all this time we've been trying to live as people of peace. But then he comes right out and says that it isn't peace he's about at all, but division. The home-wrecking, relationship-dissolving, anti-family-values kind. Not at all what we thought Jesus stood for.

The problem is we have two very different definitions of peace. If you ask us, you've got peace any time you don't have people offended or throwing things or calling each other names or shooting at one another. The baby's not throwing a tantrum; you've got peace in the house. Dad tacitly agrees not to bring up the new boyfriend's tattoos and piercings, you've got peace. Your best friend doesn't invite you over for a party and is sweet enough to never mention it – peace. The races have separate water fountains and schools and no one objects, there is peace. You don't say a blessing at dinner so your non-believer friends aren't offended or uncomfortable – peace.

I have an idea that what Jesus would say to us is that all our attempts to keep the peace actually rob us of peace.

When the angels and Zechariah talked about peace, they meant something very different from what we mean. When Jesus appeared to the disciples after the resurrection and said, 'Peace be with you,' I'm pretty sure he didn't mean that they shouldn't make waves. Because, frankly, if we are true disciples, we will cause trouble. If we do the sorts of things Jesus did, and say the kinds of things Jesus said, we will create disunity. We will make people uncomfortable. We will create division and alienate people. All around us. Even in our very own families, and yes, sometimes in our own churches.

How do you imagine Peter's family felt when he announced that he was going to follow Jesus? His mother had just been on her deathbed – who would take care of her now? He had just gotten up and walked away from his fishing business – who would put food on his family's table and a roof over their heads? He was just going to pick up and leave them, mother, wife, kids, and follow an itinerant preacher around.

How do you think Martin Luther King's family felt when he became convinced that the time had come to speak out against the injustice of racism? They had to know that disturbing that 'peace' would very likely get one of them beaten, or lynched, or shot; that it might well leave a family without a provider, children without a father. And as long as we are at it, what about the vast majority of the citizens of the United States? They were just fine with the silent tolerance of injustice that they called 'peace.' Even most Christian churches stood squarely in the court of separate, but equal.

Mary never uses the word peace in the Magnificat, that song that she sings when she is pregnant with Jesus and goes to visit her cousin Elizabeth. But she paints a very clear picture of it. She describes how God will bring down the proud and the powerful and rich. She talks about God taking the people who have been beaten down in life by the powerful by the hand and raising them up; the poor, the hungry, the people who have had their land taken from them and the people who have been taken from their land. She sings about how God won't just give them free meals here and there, lend them a helping hand and their own schools and water fountains, but he will make them equal. They will be given back everything that has been taken from them.

What she sings about, what Jesus and the angels and Zechariah talk about is Eden. Peace isn't a carefully kept status quo; it isn't stepping gingerly through life. It isn't doing our best not to upset people or stir up controversy, maybe even worse. Peace – Jesus' peace, God's peace – is the description of a world where people depend on God in utter trust, and they devote themselves to the wellbeing of each other. Peace isn't the absence of conflict. It's the presence of love. And sadly, if you attempt to go about living a life of love and trust, or worse, encouraging others

to live a life of love and trust, you will make people profoundly uncomfortable . Maybe even violent.

People don't want to live in Eden. They want to live in the world just the way it is, just the way they have made it, even if it does come with the price of oil spills, and self-serving governments, and collapsed economies, and human trafficking, and racism, and tenement housing, and homelessness .

And if you try to live in Eden, if you try to make that Kingdom of God visible here on earth, if you set out to follow Jesus and not settle for being good, moral people, your efforts will not be met with enthusiasm. You cannot be a disciple of Jesus, a true disciple of Jesus, and not expect division and strife to follow wherever you go. Never forget the irony in what Jesus said to his disciples, that you will only find life, peace, Eden, when you pick up your own cross and give up your own life.

I may need to amend something I said a few weeks ago, that Jesus' scolds never last long, and his intent is never to make us feel bad about ourselves. I think he intends for us to be scalded by his words this time. He is hot around the collar and means for us to take him seriously. If we are being nothing more than hypocrites, if we are content to be lukewarm, fair-weather Christians, then we are not really Christians.

But even when he is angry, there is still good news. There is always good news. If you and I are here today it is probably because of one of those heroes of the faith that the writer of Hebrews described. Someone in our lives was a true disciple of Jesus Christ; a part of that great cloud of witnesses. Maybe it was a Sunday School teacher, or a confirmation mentor, or a grandmother or your parents. But someone in your life was a cross-carrying disciple of Jesus and told you the gospel, both in words and in the way they lived their lives.

In other words, Christians do not come in classes. There are not regular, everyday disciples, the sort who stay at home and do their best to follow Jesus as an insurance adjuster or a housewife; and super Christians, the kind who go to Africa to be missionaries or leave their families and livelihoods to follow Jesus and spread the gospel, or the kind who stand on the mall in our nations capital and announce that they have a dream, one they are willing to die for. They did great, brave, risky, self-sacrificing things, yes, but so did the person responsible for your being here today. To be a hero of the faith, all you have to do is live the life of faith; follow Jesus wherever he leads you to go.

It won't be easy, whether he calls you to missions or a desk job, because wherever you are, following Jesus means working for peace – his kind of peace. And making peace won't always make you friends. But we can take courage in knowing that that great cloud of witnesses always surrounds us, encouraging us, nurturing us, cheering us on.