

10 Pentecost C

Jeremiah 23:23-29

Psalms 82

Hebrews 11:29-12:2

Luke 12:49-56

Rev. Trish Schmermund

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Holy Spirit Lutheran Church, Edmonton

Grace and peace to you.

Or perhaps I should say fire and brimstone!

This seems to be a tough speech from Jesus – without much comfort. And it definitely does not feel like a “Jesus-loves-you” message!

Do you know what the hardest substance on earth is? I learned many years ago in a geology class about how different rocks and stones are measured for their hardness. The hardest natural substance on earth, I learned, is the diamond. But, that was many years ago, and my scientific background has led me to find something even harder. The human heart (or will, or ego.)

The problem for God has always been how to change our hearts. God tried lots of things, like floods, fire, manna in the desert, God tried smoke and clouds and mysterious voices from heaven. God used prophets, tablets, plagues. And most of this did not change much. People still relied on themselves, were greedy, judgmental, and basically thought they knew better.

It has always been a problem that when we hear the good news, we say “Wow! That’s great – now how does this benefit me?” As if it were all about ourselves in the first place. We are tempted to transform it into something that suits us and our way of life.

In Jesus’ day he took note of how people were reworking God’s will to their own advantage. He saw the corrupt tax practices. He saw the abusive power of religious leaders. He saw the oppression of vulnerable people like women, lepers, blind, lame, children, foreigners and the poor. And much of it was actually based on people making self-advantageous interpretations of God’s word. It happens all the time.

It's easy to use examples these days from south of the border. The US political climate, supported by a large number of Christians, embodies a for-profit/for-America gospel, which isn't a gospel at all. Bolstering white, male privilege, inhumane treatment of immigrants and refugees, growth of military power, tax changes are some of the strategies that have been repeatedly named.

Yet, we're not immune either. We ought not only point the finger at someone else, but understand that this is a very personal message from Jesus. Jesus is also speaking directly to us and our ingrained thinking and ways of living that violate God's intent. We too exemplify many similar attitudes to 1st Century Palestine in the way we administer taxes, abusive power of clergy and political leaders, and the treatment of the most vulnerable populations of the world. Many of our practices, laws, policies and thinking is static, because we're in a place of comfort or benefit from it. This is sin.

And this is why love necessarily isn't always a feel-good message. Love has to be more than that, because love has the tricky job of changing the hardest substance on earth, the human heart. When all those mighty and special-effects-type lessons of fire, lightening and that sort of thing didn't work, God needed something more powerful. Love was the answer.

Recently, our sister church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) was in convention. They took a great risk declaring themselves a "sanctuary church." That has *never* happened before. They committed themselves to:

- Respond to raids, deportations, and the "criminalization" of immigrants and refugees.
- Fight individual cases of deportation, press for the end of mass detentions and lift up immigrants' voices.
- Take "prophetic action" to extend "radical hospitality" to immigrants and immigrant communities.
- Providing shelter for undocumented immigrants.

This is an example of the fire of love, the baptism of the future, the sword of peace for which Jesus appealed. And this kind of love, no doubt, brings division because it asks us to be different than we usually want to be.

And so households are at odds with one another, even the closest of family. Church families, friend circles, neighbourhoods, workplaces feel the power of love at work, but for some it's too difficult to change, then it ends up feeling like fire, as if it's divisive, as if it's not peace at all, but a sword. Phew! Jesus take the wheel! Who knew love was such difficult work!

And when it's just too hard, we ask God to help us. Believe me, God will and does help us! As the author of Hebrews encourages, *"Let us not lose sight of Jesus, who leads us in our faith and brings it to perfection"* (12:2.)

And so in faith, in hope, and courage we come together to call out and name those things that we know need to be different. We confess we don't always have the best of intentions and when we make mistakes we trust in God's forgiveness.

Here at Holy Spirit, in the last few years we've been asked to change the way we think and how we approach those who expand our imagination of "normal." We've learned about all the letters of LGBTQSIA+, about welcoming refugees, about providing hospitality as a Food Bank depot, we've learned about pronouns, we are beginning to rethink our approach to stewardship, and to learn again and again of how God is asking us to live in our own context.

We don't do this alone, but with mutual support. In faith we open ourselves to the will of God even when it is uncomfortable or doesn't personally give us further advantage.

When love changes us, we understand that God isn't sitting around with an itchy finger on the trigger, waiting to catch us in the wrong. God desires to transform all that harms us! So when we are confronted with passages like Luke's today, we don't have to pass it by in favor of something more soothing, we can hear it for the truth-telling that it is. We hear it as the transformative power of love in a challenged world.

How do we interpret the present time? Jesus says this shouldn't be a hard test. It should be as easy as looking at the sky and predicting the weather. If it's sunny it's probably going to be hot, clouds mean rain. That's how simple it is. God hasn't left us in the dark either about how to live as a holy family. We already have the necessary tools: water, Word, witness, hope.

We already know the signs: peace, cooperation, love. We already know what needs to be done: building community, forgiveness, welcoming.

By these guideposts we learn what Jesus is saying to us, what Jesus is teaching us; we learn about the desire of Jesus' heart for justice and genuine shalom for all.

There is much for us to do and pay attention to, still. This is why there remains a necessary, if not, critical, place for the church and people of faith today. When the world is consumed with itself, we can offer a hopeful perspective, an antidote to the status quo, and a message of promise that love does have the power to change your neighbour, your pastor, your MLA, parent, teenager, *anyone*... even you. Amen.