

Proper 15 (C)

Lk 12.49-56

Last week I started my sermon with a pop quiz; this week I'm going to start with a trick question. Here it is: How many of you think Jesus was a nice person?

“Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division!”

What is going on here? This doesn't sound like the Jesus of our expectations. This doesn't even sound like the same Jesus we get in the earlier sections of Luke's gospel. Remember the birth of Jesus, a choir of angels singing, “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth *peace* among those whom he favors”? Remember the Sermon on the Mount, during which Jesus says, “Blessed are the *peacemakers*, for they shall be called children of God”? What happened to, “Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth”? This doesn't sound like the Jesus who says, “Come to me, all you who are weary and are carrying heavy burdens and I will give you rest.”

No! Today, Jesus has this to say to us: “I have come to bring fire, and I have come to bring division, and just who do you think you're kidding with your self-righteous hypocrisy?” What's going on here?

Our first thought might be that he's probably talking to some Pharisees. After all, they were *all* self-righteous hypocrites, right? But alas, no; not only would it be wrong to say all the Pharisees were self-righteous hypocrites, it would also be wrong to think Jesus is talking to them. He's talking to the crowd that was following him around, hanging on his every word, anxious to see him do some miraculous sign; in other words, he's talking to folks like us. Even closer to home, he's talking to his disciples: just before Jesus speaks these words, Simon Peter asks him, “Lord, are you talking to the crowds, or are you talking to *us*?” Jesus's response is intended to make the point that he's talking to them.

There's a rule for dealing with a difficult or a challenging passage of scripture: when in doubt, check the context. Take a look at what's going on not just *in* the passage but *around* the passage.

Think back to last week's gospel: last week, we heard Jesus say, “You must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.” This week's gospel is part of that same conversation. Jesus and his disciples are headed for Jerusalem, and the closer they get to the holy city the less accommodating he becomes. There is an increasingly imperative tone to his message.

And there's something else: there's almost a sense of frustration. He's talking more and more about judgment. He repeatedly tells his disciples and the people who are following him the “time has come,” but *nobody* is getting it. This morning's gospel gives us a little window into his frustration.

When Jesus says, “From now on households will be divided and the members of one's own family will be at odds,” he's drawing from the book of the prophet Micah. And Micah had some

pretty harsh words for the people of Israel (listen closely and you'll notice something similar to what we have in today's gospel):

Here's Micah: "The faithful have disappeared from the land and there is no one left who is upright; they all lie in wait for blood and they hunt each other with nets. Their hands are skilled to do evil. The official and the judge ask for a bribe, and the powerful dictate what they desire; thus they pervert justice. The best of them is like a brier, the most upright of them a thorn hedge. The day ... of their punishment has come; now their confusion is at hand.

"Put no trust in a friend, have no confidence in a loved one; guard the doors of your mouth from [the one] who lies in your embrace. For the son treats the father with contempt, the daughter rises up against her mother, the daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; your enemies are members of your own household. But as for me, I will look to the Lord; I will wait for the God of my salvation. My God will hear me."

That's from the seventh chapter of the book of Micah, and it looks like Jesus—or at least the gospel writer—is drawing on Micah as a way of making the point that the time for half-measures is over. In fact, it's *already* too late: the Son of Man not only is coming, the Son of Man has *already come* and *nobody* is prepared. So now "their confusion is at hand," now there's nothing but misunderstanding and uncertainty. Sons rise against their fathers, daughters against their mothers, and your enemies are the members of your own house.

But the faithful servant, the anointed one, looks to the Lord. "I will wait for the God of my salvation. My God will hear me," and I will be vindicated. Jesus claims those words for himself.

Why would the coming of the Son of Man be an occasion for division? Why would the appearance of God's anointed one, the one who is above all others authorized to speak for God, the one who comes to inaugurate God's reign on earth, why would his coming be an occasion for confusion and misunderstanding?

There's an answer to that question earlier in this same conversation Jesus is having with his followers. In the first part of the twelfth chapter of Luke—in fact, right at the beginning—Jesus says this: "Nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing is secret that will not become known. Whatever you have said in the dark will be heard in the light, and whatever you have whispered behind closed doors will be proclaimed from the rooftops."

The reason the coming of the Son of Man is an occasion for division and confusion—and even judgment—is because when God shows up, everything is revealed for what it really is. There's no more hiding, there's no more playing games, there's no more duplicity, there's no more hypocrisy. When God shows up, our destiny is revealed and we become the people we have spent our lives preparing to be.

Do you know where the word "destiny" comes from? It's from the Latin term "*destinare*," which means "to make firm" or "to establish." Before our destiny is revealed, our lives our fluid, our identities are fluid, our relationships are fluid... everything is changing and impermanent, it's

all still in flux.

But when our destiny is revealed, all that changes: we become who we really are, and our lives and our identities and our relationships take on whatever characteristics we spend our lives cultivating and practicing, whether or not we actually *meant* to cultivate those characteristics.

And there is no event that is better at revealing our destiny than a face-to-face encounter with God. We can play games with one another and we can even play games with ourselves, but there's no playing games with God. We can deceive one another and we can even deceive ourselves, but there's no deceiving God.

So when the Son of Man comes, we may suddenly find ourselves becoming people we never imagined we'd be; we may even unexpectedly find ourselves becoming people we didn't *want* to be. We may find ourselves inexplicably drawn into conflicts with people we would never have thought of as enemies, people like the members of our own families. But when the Son of Man comes and the result is not peace but division, when people are not brought together but rise up against each other, it's because the coming of the Son of Man reveals that which has been hidden all along, that which we have tried to keep secret even from ourselves.

Now, you may think what all this means is that we've got to get our house in order before we have our face-to-face meeting with God. That would be a mistake. In fact, that's often precisely why we find ourselves in such a mess when the Son of Man appears. We devote ourselves to trying to be more righteous, but we only end up making ourselves self-righteous. We dedicate ourselves to trying to be more honest, but we only end up with more to hide. That's because the more we discover about ourselves the more we learn about how deep our brokenness goes.

So how then are we to prepare for our meeting with the Son of Man, the one appointed by God to judge the world? Jesus tells us: it has to do with the connection between the two things he talks about at the beginning of today's gospel, his baptism and the fire he came to start.

The way to prepare for the coming of the Son of Man is to share in his baptism. In today's gospel, Jesus says, "I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what stress I am under until it is completed!" The baptism to which he is referring is his cross, the complete surrender of his life.

But the cross was not something he underwent for himself; the cross was something he endured for us and for the sake of the world. So we participate in his baptism, we share in his cross, not just by enduring suffering or laying down our lives, but offering our lives for the sake of others and for the sake of the world. The cross is one of the ways the destiny of Jesus is revealed, and the cross reveals our destiny as well; when confronted with the baptism of Jesus, do we run from it, reject it, or do we embrace it?

Baptism, and fire: when we share in the baptism of Jesus—when we share in his cross—something extraordinary happens. "I came to bring fire to the earth," he says, "and how I wish it were already kindled!" The fire he brings is the fire of God's Holy Spirit, and it was through his death and resurrection that he became the one through whom the Holy Spirit was poured out into

the world.

That can happen to us as well: when we share in his baptism we share in his resurrection, and when we share in his resurrection our lives become the place where God's Holy Spirit is poured out into the world. Our lives are kindled with his grace and power, and we become a fire that burns with the brightness and the intensity of his love. We set fire to the things around us, the various dimensions of our lives.

In other words, the resurrection was a further revelation of the destiny of Jesus; it fixed his identity as the one who gives the Spirit without measure. The same is true for all who share in the death of the Son of Man: if they share with him in his death, they also share with him in his new life, and they become part of the work he himself is doing as he continues to pour out his Spirit on the world.

All of this is what we see going on in today's gospel: Jesus is longing for the love of God to be poured out into the world, he's longing for his own destiny to be revealed *in us* so that our destiny can be revealed *in him*. This is what St. Paul is talking about in his letter to the Romans when he writes, "the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God" (Rom 8.19).

In today's gospel, Jesus talks about those who are skilled at "interpreting the appearance of earth and sky." What are the signs of our own times? How might God be calling us as individuals and as a community of faith to bear the cross for the sake of the world? Where do we see signs of the movement of God's Spirit, opportunities for us to join in the work God is already doing to bring about the salvation of those with whom we share our lives? What is our destiny, as individuals and as a congregation?

The best way for us to find the answer to that question is to recognize the Son of Man when he comes to us. He speaks to us through the scriptures, he meets us in our celebration of the Eucharist, we see him in the fellowship of his gathered Body, and if we look with the eyes of faith we see him in the world around us. Whenever we encounter him, we not only learn who he is, we also learn who we are.

When that happens—and sooner or later it happens to all of us—may we find ourselves in him, consumed by the fire of his love, a bright and burning light that testifies to the love and the grace of God. Amen.

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