

August 19, 2007

Twelfth Sunday After Pentecost

Where on Earth is Peace on Earth?

Luke 12:49-56

*(Jesus said,) "I came to cast fire on the earth, and would that it were already kindled! I have a baptism to be baptized with, and how great is my distress until it is accomplished! Do you think that I have come to give peace on earth? No, I tell you, but rather division. For from now on in one house there will be five divided, three against two and two against three. They will be divided, father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law."*

*He also said to the crowds, "When you see a cloud rising in the west, you say at once, 'A shower is coming.' And so it happens. And when you see the south wind blowing, you say, 'There will be scorching heat,' and it happens. You hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present time?"*

Sermon

Some people have a real fondness for the good old King James Version Bible. If I hear somebody read Psalm 23 out of any other version, it just strikes me as awkward. A lot you folks probably grew up reading and hearing the King James Version read. And when it comes time for the Christmas story to be read you say, "KJV is the one for me!" It's got to start out with, "*And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Cesar Augustus...*" or it just aint right.

But it would appear that there is a section of this beloved translation of Christ's birth where the King James Version may have failed us. It comes as the host of heaven appears to the shepherds in the field singing, "*Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.*" This is one of those verses that sticks in your head from the time you're a child. A good number of us probably had to memorize and recite this line in front of the whole church while wearing a white robe made from a bed sheet, tissue-paper wings and a halo made of wire and silver garland. As a kid I heard this, I knew we were celebrating the birth of Jesus because there was a doll sitting in straw in a manger at the front of the church, so I put two and two together. Obviously Jesus came to bring peace to the world, and maybe even some goodwill too.

As I grew up this idea was reinforced by all the times I heard the word "peace" in the worship service. Occasionally I'd hear a section of Scripture with Jesus or an apostle saying "Peace be with you" or "Go in peace" or "Be at peace." I don't ever remember having my Sunday school teachers telling me about Jesus' words in our Gospel lesson today: "*Do you think that I have come to give peace on earth? No, I tell you, but rather division.*" I know for sure nobody ever told us kids about Jesus coming to cast fire onto the earth! So I, and I'm sure many other Christians, grew up with this idea that Jesus' coming was to somehow make the world a happy place where everybody got along just swell.

And gradually we began to realize that it just wasn't the case. Peace wasn't and isn't in the world. Wars rage in foreign lands. Violence and hatred happens in our own. Even in the church we have bitter disputes and infighting. And it makes us wonder, where on earth is the "peace on earth" we grew up hearing about at Christmas?

Perhaps this was a case where the translators of our good old King James Version of the Bible let some wishful thinking crawl into their pens. Most versions translate much closer to the original Greek, such as our English Standard Version which reads, "*Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom He is pleased.*" That kind of changes things, doesn't it? This peace isn't for everybody, but only those whom God finds pleasing, those who have His goodwill. And therein lies the division of which Jesus speaks—those who are in the Father's goodwill and those who aren't.

And who is it with which God is well pleased? Jesus, of course. Remember how the voice came from heaven at Jesus' baptism, saying "*You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.*" There is

no doubt here. Jesus pleases God because Jesus, being both God and man, is a man perfectly in tune with God's will. It is God's will he speaks of when He says, *"I have a baptism to be baptized with, and how great is my distress until it is accomplished."* Jesus desires to go to the cross and pay for the sins of humanity and rise to life again, for that is the will of the Father. That is Christ's baptism, and thankfully, that is our baptism also. Jesus is the only man ever to be completely righteous, thus the only man to ever please God. But it was God's will that Jesus, son of the Father, would suffer and die to pay for all sin so that through Christ, God might view sinful people but see only Christ's righteousness and thus be pleased. That's the peace we have. Through our baptism into faith we receive Christ: The benefit of His baptism—the suffering and death he suffered for all sin on our behalf **and** the resurrection to everlasting life on Easter morning. Our peace is the knowledge that we have nothing to fear because God looks upon us and through Christ is well pleased with us.

But what of these divisions Jesus speaks of? In the near-term context of Jesus' words the divisions are fairly apparent. The Gospel message was first spread mostly to the Jews. The message of Jesus dying to pay for the sins of mankind flew in the face of the temple worship practices of the day. Jews who began following Christ were ostracized and even persecuted by members of their own families. This likely also happened as Gentile Christians refused to worship pagan gods or worship the Roman emperor. Fathers were likely at enmity with sons and mothers against daughters. There were certainly divisions among those who had faith and thus God's peace, and those who did not.

But is this still applicable today? I mean, we live in a country where religious freedom is one of our most cherished rights. Everyone has the right to choose their own way to worship or choose not to worship at all. We are very tolerant of diversity in belief. So are these divisions within the family between those who have the peace of God and those who don't such a big deal? It doesn't seem like it. We try to keep peace in the family as much as possible so if we have this kind of division, we downplay it in order to keep everybody happy.

Maybe we shouldn't. Listen carefully to Christ's words again. *"I came to cast fire on the earth, and would that it were already kindled!"* In Matthew Jesus says, *"Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword."* This is judgment talk. For those of us who have God's peace, the knowledge that He is well pleased with us, we don't have to worry. But what of those loved ones who don't seem to have this peace. Are we doing them any favors by letting them peacefully go through life thinking everything is OK? Having a peaceful life on earth doesn't translate into peace before God. Are we loving them by letting them happily stumble through life only to be met with fire and sword in the end?

Think about it. Has someone in your life come into your mind as I've been speaking. Is there someone you love and care about who you worry will face the wrath of God? Have you been overt in your faith before them? Can you be bolder in your faith around them so that they might take notice? When is the last time you've spoken to them about the peace you have, about the certainty you have that Christ has forgiven your sins? Is the reason you haven't said anything because you fear it would cause conflict and division?

Be bold in your faith in word and deed! Be intentional about your Christian example before them. If you catch yourself in a sin in front of them, apologize for it and tell them why you did. Refuse to take part in sinful behavior, and don't hesitate to explain yourself. If they are sinning before you, admonish them in love. If you're hesitant to speak, envision that frightening sight of Christ returning with fire and sword. Isn't it worth risking the conflict to save a soul? Tell them you love them and that you're worried about them and why.

Am I telling you to get right up in their face and preach at them? If that's how the Holy Spirit moves you, sure! You know your loved ones and friends and the best ways to talk to them. Pray for the Spirit's guidance to find the best ways to share your faith. But do share your faith.

It runs the risk of disrupting the earthly peace you have with people. But Jesus says in John, *"Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you."* It isn't the

earth's peace we are seeking. Even if division is the result, you have your peace before God. Moreover, you have the peace that comes from knowing that you've done your utmost to share the truth of Christ with those you care about.

Christ brings division. While we really would like to believe that He brings peace on earth, goodwill toward men to everybody on this fallen planet, the fact is that He doesn't. Christ is judge. He brings both salvation and damnation. Some are welcomed to the heavenly banquet; others face His fire and sword. Through our baptism we have faith in Christ's death and resurrection to buy us back from the wrong side of that judgment. We live in Christ and know that He judges us "not guilty" and our Father in heaven looks down on us with favor. We have a peace which is more powerful than all of the world's conflicts and divisions. Through Jesus, we are at peace with God. It is a peace which transcends the strife and violence of this world. It is a peace which transcends death itself. It is a peace which reaches beyond time and into an eternity of joy and peace with God. It is a peace which is too wonderful and awesome not to share.