

Introduction

There is a story about the composer Ludwig van Beethoven that speaks about how he treated audiences who he believed were not very interested in classical music. He would begin playing a smooth, enchanting song which he had composed; so gentle and beautiful that all present would be lulled into a peaceful sort of semi-slumber. Then, just as he was playing the final notes of the piece, he would slam his arm down on as many keys as he could, all at once. It would shock the audience into instant wakefulness.

Today's text feels something like this. Chapter 12 of Luke sees Jesus speak seemingly from both sides of his mouth. He speaks to his audience, in verses 7 and 12, about not being afraid and in verses 11 and 22 about not worrying about their lives, what they will eat; or about their bodies, what they will wear. Then Jesus says in verse 32, "Do not be afraid little flock, for your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom. Sell your possessions and give to the poor...for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."

It sounds so peaceful, so soothing, so comforting. Then, just a few verses later, in our text for today, Jesus turns the peaceful language of accord and harmony into a speech about fire, stress and division. You can almost hear Beethoven slamming his arm against the keys of the piano,

"From now on there will be five in one family divided against each other...father against son, mother against daughter".

What is Jesus saying here? What is he getting at when he speaks about bringing fire to the earth and his coming baptism? Wasn't Jesus already baptised by John in chapter 3 of Luke? How do we make sense of all this?

Body of Text

A Jesus we do not expect

Most of us are not used to seeing this side of Jesus. He seems a radical, pushy leader. He is fiery in his descriptions and appears exasperated at those who seem unable or unwilling to grasp the full impact of the good news he is bringing. His approach is no-nonsense and his message is urgent.

Remember, Jesus knew where he was headed, that he would soon be betrayed and would be crucified.

Jesus also knew that saying these things to us today would lead us into deeper reflections about the way we live out our spiritual lives (like we are doing right here today –as Jesus hoped we would). Recall, we are in the time of the church year that we call *ordinary time* or the *Pentecost season*, but it is really anything but ordinary.

It is the time in the church calendar when we focus more deeply on the various aspects of the Christian life while at the same time deepening our understanding of the kingdom as something we are living right now and pulling us into watchful expectation of the second coming.

This text appears now exactly for this reason, to draw us into focussing on how we are called to live out our Christian lives.

The Gospel message

Early on in his ministry Jesus' agenda seemed more about "proclaiming the good news of the kingdom" (Luke 4:43), about letting us know that there was hope and love in this world that has its share of pain and sorrow.

Now, however, while facing increasing opposition to this message, his tone deepens. The full narrative is challenging and radical – it is like "fire" to the status quo, and not all are willing or able to embrace it. Some rebelled; some continue to rebel even today.

It reminds me, for instance, of Martin Luther King Junior and other civil rights leaders who led peaceful demonstrations in Alabama in the early 1960s to protest economic injustices for African Americans.

These unarmed marchers were attacked with fire hoses, dogs, and billy clubs – they were jailed and some were even killed.

... "father against son, mother against daughter."

Lest we believe that such narratives are only in our history books, there are contemporary examples too:

There is a group here in Canada called *Kairos* (<http://www.kairoscanada.org/>) which is an organization dedicated to creating a more just and sustainable world. I went to their website the other day while doing my research for this sermon and was reminded of the breadth of their involvement in our world's many divisions that still exist. They make statements about ecological justice, gender justice, indigenous justice, and migrant justice – all of which I believe we are called to be active supporters of. They speak about respecting inherent human dignity and meeting basic human needs. Think about it, the fact that this even needs to be said is striking – *respecting human dignity and meeting basic human needs* – 2000 years after Christ and we still need to be reminded of this.

One example - Kairos promotes an initiative called the *blanket exercise*. It is an exercise done in groups where blankets are used to describe and clarify how First Nations, Inuit, and Metis people of this country have lost access to their land, how property has been taken from them, and how dramatically this has affected their way of life.

I remember speaking with my *Lutheran Confessions* professor at the seminary one day about people's activities of *good* and *evil*. I recall him saying that the vast majority of evil in the world comes from human agency; that is, our own poor choices. Just hearing the message of Christ does not mean that we will all embrace it or interpret it properly. I think that is why our lives of prayer and community are so important for us. These activities help us test out how we are living – God changes our hearts through prayer (remember my last few sermons all about prayer), and then in community we live out these changes.

Have a look at the Kairos website if you get a chance. What stirs your heart when you read the narrative of the justice-seekers in our world today? It is serious stuff, and we are called into action by Jesus – I do not think there is any other way to look at this; and our activity might disturb some people. Thus today's text.

Here again though, it is important to read this text through a lens of God as our loving Father. It is a good test for us, in these tough texts (and this text is challenging on a number of levels), to remember that the narrative of scripture is always about God and his love for us. There is no length God will not go for us to experience his message of love, including shocking us with texts like this one.

Jesus' lament

From this perspective then, I do not think this text is *condemnation*; it is not so much about criticism as *lament* and *instruction*. Lament first:

In his love for us, Jesus laments our sinful nature and laments our dualistic tendencies of only seeing *us versus them*, *good versus bad*, and *right versus wrong*. That is not God's way. It is our ego needing to separate ourselves from each other in order to feel right, to feel superior, and to feel in control.

Jesus laments this sort of thinking and so presents this text in a way which is meant to stretch our understanding of the spiritual life. Jesus' message is always about joining, helping, standing-beside, listening, and of loving even those who are different than us. In this text Jesus laments how difficult following this call will be for us. He laments our brokenness. He laments sin, and it troubled him deeply.

Jesus knows our brokenness and so he clearly saw his coming crucifixion also.

This was the "baptism" he referred to in verse 50. He was not speaking about his actual baptism with water and the Spirit – that he had already experienced earlier in Luke – but he was referring to his "baptism" on the cross. Jesus is metaphorically referring to his coming crucifixion.

Jesus arrived on a donkey into Jerusalem, humbly presented himself to his accusers, and then sacrificed his life so that we might live. What an amazing gift this is.

It is from this lens of love that we need to read texts like this one today.

Jesus' instruction

Jesus laments our brokenness but there is instruction here too. In his discussion of *- father against son, and mother against daughter* – Jesus is pulling us into recognizing that *our spiritual lives deserve much more subtly than for us to just take sides* and then push away those who do not agree with us – as if only we have the truth inside our group of Lutheran symbols. Jesus' message is not about judgement – not about God judging us or about us judging others. Perhaps that is why he focuses on relationships between family members in this text; these are relationships that really mean something to us – it forces us to listen.

Here at Zion we have what is called a *generational* church – that is, generations of families who have worshipped here, father and son, mother and daughter – so when Jesus speaks about family members being against each other it shocks us. This is where we hear Beethoven's arm slamming his arm against the keys of the piano. Jesus wants our attention right here. *Jesus is asking us to reflect on what right-relationship might look like; how deep the call to relationship goes even when we disagree.*

It forces us to ask deeper questions, such as:

How do we live in relationship with God, with others, and with the created world that is wholesome and life-giving for all sides?

For me, from this text, it seems that we are being invited to listen when others speak; that we value conversation and dialogue without needing to push away those who do not agree with us; that discipleship is seen as much more than putting people into categories, but that discipleship is actually about *accompaniment. I accompany you on your journey. You are not alone.* It is through this sort of engagement with others that we learn compassion, as the interdependence of all living things – we are all connected. And

that is grace, running in and through us – in our lives, our gestures, our interactions, our expressions of love...that is grace, discovering God through each other.

In this way we may arrive at a more mature, living spirituality. One which *includes, joins, allows, and gathers-in*. Relationship involves our understanding that we need each other to more fully experience God - the God of love, the God of hope, the God of care, the God of kindness and generosity and openness...this God we show each other through our steadfast relationships.

God in me experiences the same God in you.

Conclusion

It was not condemnation that Jesus was implying in our text today but *lament and instruction*.

This text asks us to wrestle with, to try to make sense of, such phrases as “father against son, mother against daughter” – and to ultimately affect our understanding of how to live together in the light of Christ and to experience the grace of God in new and unexpected ways. Jesus is inviting us to change our process of living from *by and for ourselves to with and on behalf of each other*.

This is our great challenge and consolation.

Jesus loves and accepts us just as we are, exactly where we are. Nothing can come in the way of God’s love for us. God is present in our joy and sorrow, and fills our lives with hope for his return when all things will be made new.

But Jesus also comes to us in the poor, the sick, the dying, the prisoners, the lonely, the disabled, and the rejected – that is in each of us.

There we meet him, and there the door to God's kingdom is opened for us as an invitation for us to reflect God's in-breaking kingdom to each other and to the world.

Amen