

Sermon, Pentecost 10C

Jeremiah 23:23-29, Psalm 82, Hebrews 11:29-12:2, Luke 12:49-56

August 18, 2019

Faith's Fringe

The low country of South Carolina's beaches is one of the most beautiful and fragile environments of the North American seaboard. I remember an interpretive guide at a coastal museum who explained what we've learned over time. The early settlers saw these low lying areas as useless swamp land. But now we know that in fact the lowlands are nurseries, hatcheries for all kinds of plant and marine life which grow and mature to fill our oceans. As a result, these places existing on the fringe between land and ocean need our efforts of conservation.

Biologists teach us that these inter-tidal zones are fertile for spontaneous mutation. These are regions swept by flooding followed by drought and desiccation. And these extremes force the ecosystem to the edge of chaos, demanding that organisms either adapt - or die. In times primordial, it was in places such as these that fish grew legs and roots learned to breathe. It is in these places of such extremes that life comes forth.

A few years ago a book titled *Surfing the Edge of Chaos*¹ was written by a group of business consultants who observed nature as a way of understanding how we can learn to organize ourselves in systems for growth. One of their key learnings was that in nature – the arrival of equilibrium – a stable state, can lead to stagnation. It can also be a precursor to eventual death.

The lesson lifted up by the writers is that if we don't embrace risk and change, if we don't encourage extremes of experience and ideas, we will fade away. The birthing of peace, as the birth of all good things, is forged in the crucible of life lived on the edge of chaos; the kind of abundant life that is open to risk and to new possibilities.

Could this help us understand what Jesus is talking about in today's gospel? *I came to bring fire to the earth... Do you think that I have come to bring peace? No, I tell you, but rather division!*

At times, like organisms and ecosystems, you, me, the church and the world - benefit from disruption.

Wild fires are beneficial in nature because they periodically disturb the equilibrium of the forest. Fires clear out the underbrush that grows on the forest floor. Without such periodic fires, the underbrush can build up to dangerous proportions. Certain tree species found in the Australian outback have seeds held within such incredibly hard shells, that they can only be opened, exposed to the earth by the effects of fire. No wonder in scripture, the image of fire is one of purifying judgment, of cleansing.

Today, our shared public experience can feel ominous, as if we're living next to a parched forest. Reports of our partisan politics, our charged racial climate, the suffering of exiles around the world

¹ *Surfing the Edge of Chaos: The Laws of Nature and the New Laws of Business*, December 26, 2001
by Richard Pascale, Mark Milleman, Linda Gioja

barely holding on to hope in refugee camps, and the desperation of souls longing for release from poverty, violence and terror – the reporting of these circumstances has us overwhelmed. Just last week we learned that our larger church in it's triennial meeting wrestled with what it means to walk alongside immigrants and refugees. In this tinderbox time of cultural division, what can we take from today's challenging scriptures?

Like the writer to the Hebrews, Jesus is speaking here about paying the price of Christian discipleship. "Don't go thinking my arrival will bring peace. It won't bring peace but division. Following me will cost some people their relationships with their families." If you're one of those who are alienated from a parent or sibling over your differences, you might feel like Jesus is speaking to you.

First century followers of Jesus were regularly thrust into conflict, often with their own family members. If you were Jewish, to follow Jesus was to question the religious system of sacrifices, as well as the corrupt economic practices of the temple, as enforced by the political power brokers. Gentile followers called into question the system of pagan sacrifices, with its inevitable economic ties, and were persecuted for abandoning this form of civic participation. To stop participating in the sacrifices to pagan gods was to risk making them angry. So in their neighbors' eyes, these Gentile believers were shirking their civic duty, putting the neighborhood at risk of some capricious disaster meted out by an unhappy deity. First century followers of Jesus accepted as Messiah one who welcomed the disreputable, who preached a message of love and forgiveness. It meant following a Messiah who looked nothing like what the culture held as powerful or important. Following Jesus resulted in a rejection of cultural values, with painful results for relationships with family and friends.

Following Jesus meant then what it also means today: entering the freedom of a new way of being and living that others may find simultaneously offensive, terrifying and even... powerfully attractive. Think of this: those who've surrendered their wills to God to find release from addiction – those in recovery know well the resistance and even resentment of family and friends who continue to use. The heat of pressure follows those in the workplace who expose corruption, who report abuse or harassment. This same pressure threatens those who seek to leave gang life behind; at times, it scorches those who engage in nonviolent demonstration for just cause. Following Jesus in pursuing justice, reconciliation and compassion is to join in solidarity with his baptism of suffering and death.

Jesus understood his ministry as God's dramatic intervention in human history, a decisive moment that forced people to accept or reject what God was about. Yes, his ministry was meant to bring peace. But peace ultimately follows a time of intense conflict. The Gospels are full of conflict stories, with various groups opposing Jesus and his teaching.² This conflict escalates to the point of Jesus' execution.

Luke's words from Jesus come at the point of the journey when Jesus is desperately trying to teach his disciples that if they want to follow him in a way of peace, it must be through suffering — not around it, but through it. Above all, his followers must not deflect suffering onto someone else, but suffer it

² Greg Carey, Navigating a World of Division, ON Scripture, August 14, 2016.

themselves. But once again his disciples are not getting it, so, as he often did when they did not understand, Jesus presents us with a parable – or a riddle.

Jesus was frustrated! God's own people expected a Messiah who would lead the way to peace by military victory; even his closest disciples didn't understand that Jesus' way of peace involves taking on suffering, not deflecting, not projecting, not scapegoating, but absorbing it. Admittedly, to most of us, that doesn't seem like a way to peace. That's why it takes faith — faith in God's raising Jesus from the dead as a promise that new life does come through the way of suffering. Jesus went through suffering utterly alone; as followers of Jesus, we can go through it together – and when we *share* suffering, it is the beginning of peace.

This is what we learn in our reading from Hebrews. The writer catalogs for us heroes of faith by the suffering they endured. The great cloud of witnesses are those who have gone through the suffering and come out on the other side — all because Jesus pioneered this way of peace by enduring the cross.³ And why? For the sake of the joy that was set before him, that all may be called into that great family of God.

Our Lord Jesus shows us the way to take the risk of faith. For faith is trust that God's good purposes for you, for me, for the world God loves, will unfold before our eyes, will unfold in and throughout our lives. Faith is the confidence that God's promises will be fulfilled and that *nothing* can thwart God's ultimate purpose to redeem and bless all creation.

Jesus urges us to interpret the tides of time in which we are living. At this chaotic time, both in our culture and in the life of the church, our task is one of creative imagination. How can we design our time together in worship, in faith formation, in fellowship to encourage one another to live like Jesus? How would we imagine worship, preaching, Sunday School, even our coffee hour - if our goal was to equip one another to take the faithful risk of inviting God's Spirit to shape our character and our lives?

As you imagine a life shared with your new pastor, what kind of a place do you wish to enter here at church every seven days to be encouraged, equipped and sent to make a difference in the world? What kind of place do you long to return when living like Jesus creates division? Because it will. But living like Jesus will also create joy! For the One who sends us out, reminds us of our identity as God's very own beloved children, blessed to be a blessing.⁴ Brothers and sisters, as we carry the presence of Christ into the world, may courage be kindled in our lives - that we may tell others in words and deeds of God's great love for them. Amen

³ Paul Neuchterlein, http://girardianlectionary.net/reflections/year-c/proper15c_2010_ser/

⁴ Pentecost 13C, www.davidlose.net