

August 18, 2013 Proper 15C

Today after church a bunch of us are taking a bunch of children to Dutch Wonderland, and I'm really excited about it. It's one of those things that we do as a community for our younger members that builds our relationships, gets our kids a little more excited about one another and about church, and gives us some great memories.

So there's that, on one hand, and **this** on the other:

[slide of Jesus' words]

And that's just one of the things he says this morning, besides that he comes to bring fire, to bring division rather than peace; he calls the people hypocrites for carefully interpreting the weather but then being blind about what's going on right then.

And what **is** going on right then?

This morning's gospel is part of a longer unit, from the beginning of Chapter 12 to Chapter 13, verse 9, and its theme is really **watchfulness**. This year during this whole season of Pentecost, or what some people call "Ordinary Time," we are reading through the Gospel of Luke, and way back on June 30,

there was an important turning point. That was the Sunday of that gospel about foxes having holes and birds having nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head, and it started with this important verse:

[next slide: Jesus on donkey]

When the days drew near for Jesus to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem. (9:51)

This is a turning point in each of the Gospels; it tells us that Jesus is nearing the conclusion of his three-year ministry, and he's on the final stretch.

And so this man who has talked about peace and reconciliation and grace and God's incredible love for us is starting to sound more like John the Baptist with his talk of fire and baptism and division. He's starting to say, "OK, you've heard the Gospel of Good News – but don't forget that I haven't come to put my rubber stamp on all your human institutions and society's values; no, I've come to announce the Kingdom of God, and if you're going to follow this path I'm showing you, there's going to be some division along the way."

Listen to the intensity of what he's saying: In the Greek, it's more like: "**Fire** I came to cast on the earth! **Baptism** I have with which to be baptized, and what distress I am under until it is completed!"

So his word is about **watchfulness**, and there's some judgment on those who should know better but aren't prepared. The verse just prior to this reading is one you probably know pretty well: [next slide: From everyone etc.]

"From everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required; and from the one to whom much has been entrusted, even more will be demanded." Luke 12:48 Or, as The Message puts it, "Great gifts mean great responsibilities, greater gifts, greater responsibilities!"

And then he starts in on the part about divisions. I'd like you to keep in mind that Biblical scholars and theologians differ on what a lot of this stuff means: some people think this passage is a warrant for just war – go ahead and fight wrong, even if it means weapons and death. Others see a literal division between parents and children and between other close relationships when one of the

parties hears and accepts the Gospel. Some people interpret it in more psychological terms, seeing that division that we all have between our minds and our passions, kind of that kid eating the Tootsie Pop with the devil saying, "Bite it!" and the Angel saying, "Just lick it!"

But however you interpret it, Jesus knows very well about division, even division among family and friends. His own townspeople tried to throw him off a cliff when he preached in Nazareth, and you remember when his mother and siblings come to talk to him, and he says,

[next slide: Legos]

"My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it." (8:21) Even though they came around eventually, it looks like at least some of his family thought he was crazy and needed a good talking to.

But that's not all. Jesus is headed toward Jerusalem, and he will be **totally rejected** by his people. The work of redemption is going to cause division, because not everybody likes or wants the Gospel Jesus talks about. Remember the story of the Prodigal Son? There's

great joy and reconciliation, but the elder brother isn't too happy. We can hope the brother comes around, but when we leave *that* story, he's ticked off. **And remember what Simeon said when he held the baby Jesus:**

“This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and” (he says to Mary) “a sword will pierce your own soul too.” (2:34-35)¹

The Kingdom of God – *that's* a kingdom of peace and reconciliation. Yes, that's true and that's great news. But Jesus is headed for suffering and death – *that's* the baptism *he's* going to be baptized with soon – so all the talk of peace and joy and grace and love is real, it's true – but the cost of that peace and joy and grace and love is Jesus' own sacrificial giving of himself. Wow. We would prefer to hear all the good stuff, but for the good stuff to be fulfilled, Jesus had to go through the ultimate division – dying at the hand of his own people.

¹ This section was in the script but I decided to leave it out when I actually preached.

So now we are ready to hear our part in all this. The part about readiness, about obedience and commitment to Christ. Aren't we? I hope we are, because that's the whole point of this story.

Remember [**Sandra: point to slide**] “Who is my mother and who are my brothers? Here are my mother and brothers; anyone who does the will of my Father in heaven.”

I talk a lot about grace and peace and forgiveness and how much God loves us; it's not as easy for me to talk about judgment or warnings or rewards and punishment. But consider this: think about all your relationships – parents, children, siblings, spouses, bosses, neighbors, church community – every single relationship requires responsibilities and commitment. We don't want to apply those to our relationship with God, but just like any other, we have responsibilities when we commit our lives to God. For Jesus, “obedience to the will of God is fundamental” (Difficult Sayings of Jesus, 37). Jesus says to his followers that commitment to him means they will be persecuted; they will need to have new and different priorities in their lives; it's gonna affect our relationships one way or the other.

Huge change affects relationships. Our kids go off to work or to college or marriage or whatever – and our relationships change drastically. And some of us take it better than others. We know that when addicts to almost anything – gambling, food, drugs, spending money, work – get into recovery, you’d think that their relationships would all improve, but it changes the dynamics so drastically that often relationships don’t survive the change. During the time of civil rights, Christians who spoke the truth were ostracized by their communities at best; some civil rights workers were hounded, their families threatened or harmed, some of them killed by supposed Christians who couldn’t hear God’s word of redemption and love for **all** our brothers and sisters of whatever race or nationality or creed.

[next slide: Relationships, goals, values]

Our commitment to God, our commitment to Jesus Christ, **has** to affect our values, our goals, our relationships, our behaviors, our priorities – and if you look and your life and don’t see any impact on those things you’d better look again, and ask yourself if you really want to follow this amazing God Man.

So we are called to be ready and obedient. From reading all of the Gospels, even just reading the Gospel of Luke until this point, we know that be ready and obedient means:

[Next slide: bullet points]

- **Deciding to love and trust in God with all our hearts and minds and souls**
- **Putting away all hypocrisy – stop saying one thing and then doing another**
- **Holding our material possessions lightly, and as faithful stewards, remembering that the one who dies with the most toys ISN’T the winner!**
- **Living a life of Kingdom values and ethics and priorities and behaviors**
- **Staying connected with God by a life of constant prayer.**

It’s not going to be enough to be like the slave earlier in Chapter 12 who says, “I did not know you were coming or what you wanted me to do!”

[next slide: Hurricane Katrina]

As one preacher suggested, “To say ‘we had no idea’ is [like] the excuse of bureaucratic servants at all levels of government who protested ‘how could we have known’” when it all hit the fan after Hurricane Katrina. “They *should* have known, and *are* morally responsible for their lack of knowledge.”

[last slide: Freedom]

But I'm here to say that all this is good news, because a life connected to God, a life of readiness and obedience, is really a life of freedom: freedom from the self-will that binds and imprisons us, freedom to love and be loved like we can hardly imagine.

Yes, we're taking our children to Dutch Wonderland, and no doubt about it, this is an important part of what we do as a church. But it becomes a problem when we stop there, thinking that's what church is all about. is what it means to be a member of the church. And that's a mistake church members and even ordained clergy fall prey to all too often; we do these things to build community, to build relationships – but we want to build communities and relationships so that we are strengthened as a community to be obedient, to be ready, to carry our faith into every aspect of our lives and then out into the world.

So today, let's **all** stand before God with our hearts open; let's ask for God's forgiveness where we've come to God and to God's church for comfort and companionship rather than to be built up as faithful servants of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Let's conclude with a prayer: God, we ask you to constantly renew our hearts, and that you give us the courage to live a Christlike life. We thank you that Jesus **died** for this; and we get to truly **live** for this as a result. Amen.