

Sermon for August 14, 2016 – “Strange Blessings”

20th Sunday in OT, Year C – Text: Luke 12:49-56

Sigmund Freud came up with notion of projection in the 1890s. He defined it as a defense mechanism, one where a person unconsciously rejects their own unacceptable attributes by “projecting” them on to something or someone else. This often happens in a religious context, as psychologists, sociologists and theologians have reminded us over the last hundred years or so. We Christians often read the Bible with a specific cultural context, usually our own. We then impose the standards of that context onto the God of the Bible. And, whether you arrive at a domesticated, tame Jesus, a Jesus who is the source of pithy, quaint sayings that sound like they belong in a greeting card, or a Jesus as the agent of God’s wrathful judgment. Well, I’m sorry to say that both are equally hollow. The truth is that the scripture offers us a Jesus who, quite often, names hard realities in hard terms. I used to hate this fact about the Bible. I used to have little appreciation for these disturbing passages. I used to make every effort to avoid them altogether. Why? Well, it’s because it’s taken me a while to realize that description is not a prescription, that something being named is not necessarily something that we must actually do, and that because Jesus says something that doesn’t automatically mean that the content of his statement is automatically a good thing. “Scriptural” does not always mean “right.”

Let me explain what I mean... Part of the genius of scripture is that it names realities about our lives that are very wrong. We’ve a sense of what it meant for Jesus in His time to say that His presence on earth would bring a sword of division to his followers, one that would force the disciples and early Christians to make very difficult decisions about discipleship, one that would put them at odds with the structures around them; things like government, religion, family, even one another. Let’s face it. This is one of those weeks when the Gospel reading makes you want to turn to one of the other texts appointed for this Sunday. It’s harsh, more than a little threatening, and rather uncomfortable to hear. But here’s the question: Is that the passage’s fault or ours? Here’s what I’m getting at.

Reading and preaching biblical texts always involves bridging the distinct contexts of the biblical story and today’s world. Some weeks the chasm between those two is both deep **and** wide. This week is a good example. By and large, we avoid conflict in our congregations at all costs yet here Jesus is talking about bringing just that. We want peace, what’s more, we call Jesus the prince of peace, yet just now Jesus says that’s not what He came to bring. We are, by and large, focused on the present. While we may have something of an interest in the so called “end times”, we’re certainly not looking for the end of the world, and yet in this passage Jesus seems to look to the future and it is, to say the least, foreboding. Do you see what I mean?

Jesus dies, we regularly confess, for our sins...those of both omission and commission. And, the promise of the gospel is that there’s nothing we can do to **lose** that forgiveness or the larger inheritance of the abundant, eternal life that Jesus won. Sometimes that promise leads us into a kind of pious laziness or lethargy, a place where we come to believe that our failures and shortcomings aren’t all that serious because we’ve been justified by faith. But sometimes, and maybe this is one of those times, that promise of forgiveness and life might also lead us to a kind of holy engagement. A place where we as individuals, households, and communities of faith commit ourselves once again to being “people of the Way.” People who strive to follow Jesus in word and deed knowing that the path we trod follows His own and that He accompanies us on it.

Perhaps our efforts will lead to strife and division, at least for a time. But they'll also lead to a deeper sense of that peace that passes all understanding, as we are caught up in the abundant life that comes from following our Lord. As with the words Jesus speaks in today's reading, what I'm saying may not be easy to hear. I recognize that's sometimes the case. That's one of the downsides of being a pastor – having say to things that folks don't like or want to hear. But, like anyone, I have to be faithful to my calling. And believe me some things are easier to say than others. But, here's the thing, the Bible names reality in unsparing terms. The theology of the incarnation tells us that Jesus inhabits the reality of the world without reservation – even unto death. But our world is ruled by a host of realities, a large number that seems to be growing every minute of every day, that Jesus did not come to bless. Naming them can often a preface to judgment instead of blessing. Have you listened to some of the “discussion” on the issue of race in this country? So the fact that naming judgment happens on terms different than ours is probably a good thing, even beyond the whole “judge not, lest ye be judged” thing. And, when we leave the judgment to God alone therein lies the key to these realities ability to offer salvation or become a blessing. Both for ourselves and others.

What am I talking about? Well, when we're at our best and most confident we take solace in our ability to manage our lives in ways that make sense to us. Stability and predictability are blessings in their own right and we're right to value them. But they are fleeting and therefore can't be trusted. The daily news is a reminder of this. It's a reminder of the painful reality that stability and clarity hang by a thread if they aren't illusions themselves. It doesn't take much does it? A trip to the doctor, a phone call, an overheard snippet of innocent gossip can throw us into chaos. And in that chaos, we can lose proper focus and perspective. We look for someone to blame, someone to judge. Things can get out of hand pretty quickly; I'm thinking of the recent police shootings in Dallas and Baton Rouge. At the same time chaos can also come from the force of love in the face of tragedy; I'm remembering images of those who rushed toward Ground Zero on 9/11. The images of the people at the Boston Marathon who ran toward the explosions in order to help. The images of first responders – police, fireman and EMT's – when they rush to the scene of an accident. The truth is that at such moments we're powerless to interpret the signs and times of our lives much less judge or do anything else about them. You see, both evil and love have equal potential to shift the ground beneath our feet. When the familiar becomes ineffective, when the commonplace ruptured beyond repair, only the strange God of strange blessings can save. And knowing as Mary did what it means for a “sword to pierce the soul” the recipient of such salvation may well struggle and stare honestly into the face of their own complicity in bringing more swords into the world already cut to pieces. This is a hard truth. But ask anyone recovering from drug or alcohol addiction and they'll tell you hard truths are the ground upon which real hope stands. Jesus knew this... Unfortunately, honesty can be hard to find in churches. But, honesty about brokenness especially our own, is a necessary preface to healing. Jesus knew this too...

Brothers and sisters, here's the thing...We live in a world of swords; some in our wallets, some in our hearts, and some in the words that come from our mouths and the divisions among us are threatening to destroy us. But the strange Savior who names brokenness, the strange Savior who refused to avoid hard truths, the strange Savior who sought forgiveness for those who sought to take His life, He is the horizon against which the in-breaking of God's salvation shines through. And when violence and conflict become familiar, it's the blessing of God's peace which passes all understanding that is strange enough to save us from it.

Thanks be to God.

Amen and amen.