

The 10th Sunday after Pentecost: Holy Trinity Church: August 14, 2022

Proper 15 Luke 12: 49-56: Discerning the Signs of the Times

Preached

By

The Rev. John E. Higginbotham+

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN!

In the beginning of Luke Chapter 12, we read that Jesus' popularity has become so great that he and his disciples were being followed by a crowd of "many thousands" of people. The crowd was so boisterous that Jesus and his disciples were in danger of being trampled by them. Just think how it feels to be a Rock Star? The disciples must have felt good about their decision to follow Jesus, seeing as how his ministry was becoming so influential. Only Jesus understood that they were following him, not to a throne or a new political movement, but to his death on the cross, the death of an outcast. From popularity to shame and suffering and persecution. In a short time, that crowd of many thousands would be lining the streets of Jerusalem and loudly demanding Jesus' death at the hands of the Roman government.

So, Luke's Gospel chapter 12 is basically one long teaching on how to disengage from the world's attractions, from its values, from its popularity contests. Jesus is trying to warn his disciples that they can't count on the crowd's approval for long. He knows he will be leaving them soon, and they will suffer greatly as they try to carry on his mission without him. They will pay a price for following him, so they would better be prepared for it. But he can also see how the Holy Spirit, his Spirit living in them, will lead them to change the world.

Many leaders gauge the success of their ministry on its popularity, on the number of followers they have. Jesus gauged the success of his ministry on his obedience to God. And he warned us that obedience to God will make us unpopular with the world. In Luke 12, he's teaching his disciples, "Don't let your current circumstances blind you, or your current comforts bind you to this world. Saying 'Yes' to me means saying 'No' to this world and its comforts and priorities and value systems."

Have you ever dropped in on the middle of a conversation and thought, "Wait a minute, did I hear that right?" That's how we may feel when we read this passage from Luke 12. Jesus is the love of God in the flesh. He is the Prince of Peace. The one whose death healed our separation with God and with our

fellow human beings. So, these words from Jesus sound like they're out of character for him. That's what happens when we take Jesus' words out of context. To understand this piece of scripture, we need to understand the "conversation" around it. I want you to keep that context in mind as we read the first few verses in Luke's Gospel today: Jesus said, *"I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what stress I am under until it is completed! Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division! From now on five in one household will be divided, three against 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.*

My brothers and sisters in Christ, this is a great watershed. From here the waters flow either toward the Atlantic or the Pacific. I realized that the decision to follow Jesus the Christ is that kind of decision. It was a watershed moment for the first disciples of the early church, and it is a watershed moment for the disciples today in this church. Once you commit to following Jesus' example, you leave your old life behind and take up a new life that is not under your own control. There is a great quote from British philosopher Gordon Graham. He writes the following, "Decision is a sharp knife that cuts

clean and straight; indecision is a dull one that hacks and tears and leaves ragged edges behind it.” Decisions are not the same as opinions or feelings. Decisions require action. Decisions have a result. Decisions effect change. Sitting in church is not a decision. Conforming your life to the character, priorities and actions of Jesus is a decision.

“Decision is a sharp knife that cuts clean and straight . . .” That’s what Jesus is talking about in this Gospel from Luke the Evangelist. The decision to follow him is a sharp knife. It cuts away our ties to this world and its value systems. There are three ways that following Jesus creates division, and we need to consider these seriously before we make the decision to commit our life to him.

First, following Jesus divides us from the person we used to be. In Second Corinthians 5, the apostle Paul writes, “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!” You are a new creation. St. Paul would know about these things. Before he became a follower of Jesus, he was a zealous member of the Pharisees, a sect that believed in strict obedience to traditional Jewish law. And his strict obedience inspired him to violently persecute Jesus-followers. After he became a follower of Jesus, he became a leader in the early church, helping to spread the message

and ministry of Jesus throughout the Roman empire and writing thirteen of the twenty-seven letters that make up the New Testament.

We must always remember that it was St. Paul who founded Christian Church. In Philippians 3, Paul talks about how influential and connected he used to be. He lost his status, his power, his connections; St. Paul lost it all when he became a follower of Jesus. And he goes on to say that he counts all the perks of his previous life to be garbage compared to the *“surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things.”*

That’s St. Paul’s testimony. Let me relate to you the testimony of a more contemporary figure another Paul, Noel Paul Stookey. Noel Paul Stookey is one-third of the world-famous folk music group Peter, Paul & Mary. In 1968, Paul was greeting fans after a concert. A young man came up to Paul and said, “I want to talk to you about the Lord.” Paul doesn’t know why his heart started to beat a little faster. He doesn’t know why he sat down and listened to this young man. But he does know that when he and this young man prayed together, God changed his life. During the prayer, Paul saw himself as a “hollow man.” All the things he had been chasing after were meaningless.

He says of his life after that prayer, “I was washed, cleansed. I couldn’t believe it. Suddenly when I had admitted that I was sorry for the life I had led

without God, everything collapsed, and I was perfectly balanced. I had been given day one again.” You see my sisters and brothers in Christ, following Jesus is never about improving your life. Jesus made that very clear.

Following Jesus is about dying to your old life and taking up his life. Decision is a sharp knife. Following Jesus divides us from the person we used to be.

Following Jesus also divides us from the people around us. Jesus’ own brothers didn’t believe in his identity and ministry until after his resurrection from the grave. Jesus understands how painful such separation is. It’s a natural consequence of living out the radical priorities of Christ, priorities such as loving your enemies, speaking the truth, pursuing peace, and not conforming to the value systems of the world. You are going to make others uncomfortable around you. Your character and lifestyle will make others question their own values and priorities.

Let me tell you a story about a man who experienced such separation from his family and friends. Franklin McCallie was raised in a prominent, wealthy family in Chattanooga, Tennessee. One of Chattanooga’s most prestigious private schools is named after his family. Franklin was born around 1940. His family were staunch supporters of segregation. Franklin’s only contact with Black people were with his nanny and the Black men who served as his

family's household staff. Even though they were Christians, the McCallie family had for generations assumed that separation of the races was right and good in God's eyes, and that Black people were not meant to be equal with whites.

In 1961, when the civil rights movement was gaining influence on college campuses across the nation, a college buddy invited Franklin McCallie to a small gathering between white and Black students from separate Tennessee colleges. When Franklin heard the stories of discrimination against these young men and their families, he began to question his family's acceptance of inequality and racism. When he returned home and tried to tell his family about his new insights, his uncle called him an embarrassment to the family name. Later, when Franklin moved back to Chattanooga to take a teaching position with The McCallie School, he insisted that the school be integrated. His father refused, so he took a job instead at the all-black Howard School. He took his passion for integration and equal rights to the churches, to the politicians, to the streets. Occasionally, Franklin's father would call to criticize him for his activism. Didn't he know he was ruining his reputation? One day, Franklin learned that the local Kiwanis Club had accepted its first Black member. He visited the head of the Club, a family friend, to thank him

and to ask him how he had convinced all those white men to finally accept a Black man as a brother. The head of the Kiwanis Club said it was a member's influence that changed that club. Who was it then Franklin wanted to know? "Franklin, didn't you know? That was your father." Franklin went directly to The McCallie School campus to find his father. Father and son embraced. And then Franklin's father spoke the words Franklin never thought he'd ever hear: "I've been wrong about Black people my whole life," said his father. Not long afterwards, Franklin McCallie's father opened up, the McCallie School to boys of all races, and all the private schools in Chattanooga followed their example. Thank God that Franklin McCallie's father realized and repented of his mistaken attitude. Thank God he and his son reconciled. But that's not always the case. Who do we love more, Jesus or our family and friends? We have to make a choice. Decision is a sharp knife. Following Jesus divides us from the people around us.

My dearest sisters and brothers in Christ, this is the challenge for this 10th Sunday after Pentecost. Jesus divides us from the value systems of this world. Jesus never hid this fact. Jesus lived to teach people about the Kingdom of God and its values. He never tried to gain influence with the power players in his society. He even tried to turn people away from following

him. Jesus would not conform to the culture, even for the sake of popularity or success. Even for the sake of saving his own life. And if we are new creations in Jesus Christ, then we are called to give up everything, including our own lives, to follow his example. It's not easy to walk away from the life we know, the people we love, the value systems that have defined us. It's not easy following Jesus. And that's why Jesus used such strong language in this Gospel from Luke¹². No matter how popular and successful he looked in this moment, he knew that he was heading toward the cross. Jesus valued obedience to God over his own life. And we cannot say we are followers of Jesus until we can make that same decision. I believe the Episcopal Church has reached out to the LBGTQ community. The Episcopal Church reached out for ordination to the priesthood. The Episcopal Church shines the light upon our dark sin of racism, which is the Original Sin of slavery at the foundation of our nation. I believe our church is a building bridge. So, we must continue working in the culture of encounter which shortens the distance and enriches us with differences in the same manner of Jesus the Christ who made close to everyone. We are not to judge. We are to love and to pray for help, Lord Jesus. AMEN!