

Long Division

A Message for Sunday Morning Worship
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT
August 18, 2019
Text: Luke 12:49-56

This is a doozy of a Gospel text, one of those texts preachers tend to skip over because the Jesus it reveals is not the Jesus we are comfortable with. The Jesus of this text is ranting, blowing off steam. He's been preaching and teaching in front of yet another crowd for awhile and he's sensing that they still don't get what he's trying to tell them. He knows the disciples who live with him every day still don't get it. And he knows he's running out of time to get his message across. The entire text of this chapter in Luke is a summary of his teachings presented in the form of a sermon to a crowd. He's made all sorts of points so far in his sermon, and some of it has been quite upbeat and positive. He's talked about not falling into the sin of greed because of your desire for things. He's talked about not worrying about possessions because we can all be assured of God's love for us as proven by how God cares for the birds and the flowers. This the Jesus we know! This is the Jesus we love! This is the Jesus we want to hear because he makes us feel better, giving us hope for a better future and promises of a better life. Yes, *this* Jesus!

But, in this text, Jesus finally gets down to business. He finally gets down to telling the people what they don't want to

hear. He's telling them that to live as his followers, as God's Beloved, as the inheritors of the Kingdom of God, they have to get ready for things to be difficult, even painful, even dangerous. He talks about slaves and masters and who is ready – and who isn't – for the work that needs to be done. We talked about that part of the message last Sunday, about how God expects each of us to have an action plan for how we will engage, participate, take a role in bringing God's kingdom into reality in the here and now. Not in some faraway heaven reached only after death. And we talked about Jesus explaining how hard that would be.

This morning we are picking up on what Jesus talks about next, and that dear friends, is where Jesus gets real. He tells them the truth, the complete unvarnished truth. And what is that? Jesus doesn't mince any words: "I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were kindled!" Yikes! Fire? Now hold on. No one said anything about fire. "Fire bad!" to quote the Frankenstein character in *Hotel Transylvania*. Yes, indeed. Fire IS bad but just what does Jesus mean by fire here? Scholars agree that "fire" is used here by Jesus as a symbol of judgment. But who is being judged and by whom? And what are they being judged for? We can think about this in two ways. The more traditional viewpoint would be that the people are being judged by God as to whether or not they are holding up their end of the bargain to bring the Kingdom of God into reality on earth. Are they living

the Gospel message of loving God and loving the other to the fullest extent possible, or not? That makes sense. It's God doing the judging and we're the ones being judged. That's it, right?

Yes, as far as it goes, but that thinking doesn't go far enough. It doesn't go far enough because it brushes aside the first step in this whole process of hearing Jesus' announcement of the Kingdom of God here and now. That first step is to *hear* the message, *receive* it into our very beings and *then decide* to respond by changing the way we live. So, this fire of judgement Jesus is referring to here is really a two-step process – Hearing and responding as the people of God is Step One. Recognizing God's judgement of us for that response is Step Two. This is why Jesus is saying he wishes the fire were already kindled – that the hearts of fire burning in the people to respond to God's invitation to this incredible new life as part of the Kingdom of God were already in flames, because he senses they're not.

But how does he know they're not? They're just sitting there listening to him, like you're listening to me. How could he know they don't get it, at least not like he needs them to? Luckily, he tells them – and us that's because they clearly don't realize what will happen as a result of the radical message of love he brings: “Do you think I come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division!” Yikes! What the heck does that mean? The great peacemaker, the one who teaches about love and justice,

about mercy and healing, about forgiveness and caring for the other is now saying he's not here to bring peace? I don't get it. I just don't get it.

Yes. Exactly. That's his point. If all you see in Jesus, all you hear in his words, is that love is the answer, that all we need to do is "give peace a chance" and everything will be fine – it will all just happen magically, mystically – poof! – then you don't get it. This is hard stuff, Jesus says. People are NOT going to want to hear this message that God loves all people equally. People are NOT going to want to accept that God's grace is for absolutely everybody and not just for certain people. Not only that, Jesus continues, people are not going to want to do what they need to do to bring about the kingdom of God on earth. They are not going to want to turn the other cheek. They are not going to want to give clothes to the naked and food to the hungry. They are not going to want to see people in prison as worthy of God's love and attention. They are just *not* going to want to do that, and it won't stop there. They won't like it that you ARE doing these things as followers of Jesus. They won't like it that you see everyone as equal before God, deserving of love and respect and a fair shot at a decent life. They won't want you to advocate for help for people living on the margins because, obviously, they are in the mess they are in because of their own bad decisions. It's their fault they're poor. It's all their fault, they'll say, passing judgement

reserved to God. And they'll continue passing judgment, only this time on *you*, because you don't see the world the way they do so *you* must be wrong.

This is Jesus' message in this powerful and surprising text. Jesus is ranting here! He's not the sweet, gentle, smiling Jesus bouncing babies on his knee as cute little lambs frolic nearby. This is the Jesus who knows exactly what's going to happen to him because he dares to confront the people with the good news of the Kingdom of God. He already knows he's going to die because he knows that while many people will receive his message of love and hope with open arms and hearts, many will not. And he also knows that those who refuse to receive the message of this new way of understanding how to love God and live as God's people will not hesitate to squash his message and his life, whatever it takes.

So, what we see in this passage, dear friends, is a very human Jesus who knows his days are numbered because his enemies are real. He knows he only has so many days left to get this message across to the people open to receiving it and, in this moment, he's getting frustrated because he doesn't think they get it. He doesn't think they get that if they really choose to follow him, to do what he is telling them to do in the way they live their lives, then they will pay a price. And it will be a steep one. Friends and family will turn away from them. People who claim to love them will not

understand nor will they accept their decision to follow Jesus. And that, Jesus wants them to understand, will be very painful. But, there's no way around it either because you are either committed to the Kingdom or you're not. There's no halfway.

Jesus knows, in other words, that he is destined to be the first casualty of the preaching of the Kingdom of God now possible because of him. He also knows something else which is just as important. He knows that there can be no reconciliation with God and with each other without first having the division that the preaching of the Kingdom creates. And he does preach reconciliation. He does preach hope that there is always a new beginning possible with God. Yes, life will be challenging as one who works for the coming of the Kingdom of God here and now because it will inevitably cause you to change your values, your priorities, your goals and even your behavior in day to day life. But all that challenge, all that division and the heartache it causes will fade into nothingness as the kingdom of God takes hold, really takes hold. That is what we hope for. That is what we work for. That is what we pray for, always.

Division will happen because of the message of the Gospel and the Kingdom of God it reveals, Jesus says. That is inevitable. And it will not be easily resolved because the coming of the Kingdom of God is so elusive to humankind precisely because we are human. So, what we're really talking about is living with this

division over the long haul. This long division, this separation which occurs as a direct result of the preaching of the Kingdom of God is real – and it’s still happening today. And it’s not for the reasons you may be thinking. It’s not because of atheists or agnostics or followers of other religions just not getting it. Not at all. The biggest divisions we face as people seeking to live the Kingdom of God here and now are the other Christians who keep telling us we’re wrong. And, sadly, too often we progressive Christians are very quick to respond to those folks in anger telling them that they’re wrong. This is where all this gets really tricky and why, frankly, our country is in the mess it is right now.

All of us who claim the name Christian are just too busy arguing sometimes to do the hard work of following Jesus. We lose sight of Jesus when we focus only on our differences and not on our common faith in God. We forget that in this violent, fragile world we need all the help we can get! Both sides get so invested in proving who’s right and who’s wrong that we don’t accomplish much at all that makes the Kingdom any more real. Sadly, division which has come down to us over the millennia is still our reality and, if we’re honest, we can see it may well be our undoing if we refuse to try to address it. Jesus knew this would happen too. That’s why he said, “You hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present time?” This he said to people

who guessed about the weather from what they saw on the horizon!! Imagine what he'd say to us with all the incredible technology we have at our disposal! Look what's happening, he'd say! You have children living in cages like animals, separated from their families. You have poisoned lakes and rivers that are killing people and animals. You have people who believe they have a God-given right to all the wealth while others don't have enough food or medicine or even a place to rest. What the heck? Can't you see what's happening all around you?? Stop fighting about who knows me better and do something that shows you love me, Jesus would say. Show me that you get it that loving me means loving the other and loving the earth God entrusted to you. Show me you get it.

But how do we do this? How do we stop fighting with people who seem so vested in the fight? How do we reach beyond our divisions to find reconciliations? I don't have any grand ideas, I admit. But we have to start somewhere and that can be anywhere. Smile at the person with the insulting bumper sticker. Turn the other cheek to the nasty comment. Do some reading to learn as much as you can about what's happening in our country and our world. I've got some great articles and books I can recommend! Or watch a movie or television show that challenges you to think. I'm going to be preaching on one movie in particular this fall – *McFarland USA*. Find a copy and watch it now and see if you can

figure out why I think it deserves a sermon. In short, challenge yourself to see, really see, the divisions all around us in order to understand and confront them in a way that makes sense to you. Dear friends, the simple truth is that everyone can do something to tear down the divisions between us. It doesn't have to be big or dramatic. It just has to be real, whatever will move us beyond the zero sum society we have devolved into where some have everything – money, power, influence – and others have little or nothing. Zero. We must move beyond our divisions as the people of God and become the Beloved Community Jesus describes over and over again. Dear friends, we are better than what we have become. We must do the hard work of moving beyond the long history of division which keeps us separate in order to work together to bring the Kingdom of God fully alive in our midst. Jesus is counting on us. God is guiding us. The Holy Spirit is empowering us. Let's get going... Amen.