



“I Disagree”

Pastor Jan Shannon

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Scripture:

Luke 12:49-56 (NRSV)

49 “I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! 50 I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what stress I am under until it is completed! 51 Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division! 52 From now on five in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three; 53 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.” 54 He also said to the crowds, “When you see a cloud rising in the west, you immediately say, ‘It is going to rain’; and so it happens. 55 And when you see the south wind blowing, you say, ‘There will be scorching heat’; and it happens. 56 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?”

Sermon:

How many of you know the old saying, “Red sky at night, sailor’s delight; red sky at morning, sailor take warning”? There was a very red sky at sunset last night, telling me clearly that today was going to be a hot, hot day. And it IS a hot day, weather-wise, and our text for this morning is pretty *hot stuff* too. Jesus is using some pretty heated language to impress upon his hearers that trouble is coming.

First off, why does Jesus want fire to come? Well, actually, Jesus isn’t saying he *wants* fire to descend, the Greek imperative actually translates more like, “Fire, I came, to cast on the earth!” Here we see Jesus restating what John the Baptist said would happen. John said, “I baptize with water, but there stands one among you whose sandals I am unworthy to

untie. He will baptize you with fire and with the Holy Spirit.” The fire that Jesus is bringing is not a fire that destroys, no, it is a fire that cleanses.

Another text that puts Jesus and fire in the same context, is found in the Gospel of Thomas. This gospel, though not found in the canon of our protestant bible, has some interesting things to say. The Gospel of Thomas, verse 82 says, “Whoever is near me is near fire; whoever is distant from me is distant from the kingdom.” Jesus is personified as fire, himself, the one who will burn out the sickness that pollutes our world. But as anyone who has ever had surgery knows, there must be division and pain before the healing can begin.

Jesus knows what his future holds. He knows that he will suffer and die. He has told the disciples at least three times that the reason he is going to Jerusalem is to die. Now Jesus says he is so consumed by the thought of his impending baptism by fire, that he wishes it would happen immediately. We all know how stressful it is to wait for something bad to happen. There’s an old saying about waiting for the dentist being worse than the actual dentist visit, but I personally think that’s bunk. But then, I hate going to the dentist... But, seriously, waiting for something bad to happen; dreading it every day for days or weeks or months, the fear and stress grows and grows until you are consumed by it and can think of nothing else. This is how Jesus feels. “I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what stress I am under until it is completed!”

Jesus words and actions will bring division, that is what he is telling his disciples, and Jesus will, himself, be the first casualty of the division that His gospel of peace will bring. The disciples must have known that some of the Pharisees were plotting to kill Jesus, because they have had to leave town a couple of times, in a hurry, to avoid capture. With all of Jesus’ warnings, and with the threat of arrest and even death from some of the most powerful people in the area, why don’t the disciples understand that Jesus’ ministry is going to bring division?

I’ll tell you one thing, the disciples sure knew all about division, because very quickly after Jesus death and resurrection, they themselves were the source of the first divisions within the early Church. We read about the first Church disagreement in the book of Acts, chapter six, and about another, sharper disagreement in chapter 11, and so on, and so on, and so on. For over 2,000 years, the Church has been disagreeing on what it means to be the Church, what Jesus words and actions mean in and for each new age, and how the Church should ‘do church’ as each new generation comes of age. Lots of things to disagree about. Lots of divisions among us. I suppose we could say that the only thing the Church agrees about is that Jesus was right in saying he came to bring division, because they have been proving him right for over 2,000 years.

Jesus’ words and actions will bring division. In order to bring about the kingdom of God, Jesus sacrificed himself for us. In humility, and with a desire for the reconciliation of all, Jesus shows us how to bring about the kingdom of God, the kingdom of peace, and that’s through sacrifice.

I miss Pastor Andy. Do you all miss her too? I really like her...she and I often have people tell us that they can tell how much we enjoy working together, and it's true, we do. I've missed her these past 12 weeks, but, even as much as we get along, and enjoy working together, Pastor Andy and I don't always agree. Our personalities and styles are different, as is our approach to our work. Neither of us is always right, and truly there might not be a "right way" to do the work of the church, so we sometimes disagree. But while we often disagree, we strive to not be disagreeable. We strive for unity across our differences, and peace, even in the midst of disagreement. We continue to work together, and that's really the crux of my message today. How can people disagree and still stay together?

Pastor Andy and I both write for Spokane Faith and Values. SpokaneFAVS is a website which provides non-sectarian coverage of religion, spirituality and ethics in the Inland Northwest. They promote dialogue through online journalism and community engagement opportunities. Just the other day, Pastor Andy wrote an article for FAVs called, "I Dare Not Be Silent." In her article, Andy discusses the climate of fear and distrust that is permeating our world, and her renewed intent to not remain silent in the face of all the discord. While some people on Facebook are unfollowing and unfriending relatives and old friends, Pastor Andy says she will not cut off relationships like that, but instead says this, "I was reminded again that silence is cooperation with the very things I feared and even hated. To be willing to talk and to listen, to struggle with the despair or the anger or the fear, and to do this in community; this is to begin to let go of the fear, and maybe the hate. It is a way to find courage to speak and to stand with my truth."

This is how we can disagree, and yet remain united – by agreeing to listen, to really hear the other side. To know your own truth and speak for it, but to humbly allow that you may be incorrect and be ready to learn from the wisdom of another. To watch our language and our tone, to say, "I disagree," instead of "You're just wrong." To remember that though we may not agree with the beliefs ideologies of another, we still support their right to hold those beliefs, and affirm the person as valuable and beloved in the eyes of God.

Jesus came to show us who God is, but our interpretations of that message separate us...but do they have to? No, God is unity; God Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer show us what unity in diversity can look like. But Jesus knew that his message would meet with a strong negative response, and we should expect no different. We should expect that when we preach love and peace, folks will disagree.

One of my favorite verses is found in Psalm 120:7, "I am for peace; but when I speak, they are for war." That pretty much describes my interactions on Facebook ...except for the times when I am for war. Sometimes I can't take the memes in favor of more and bigger guns, or the cries to build a wall around the country I love and keep all the 'bad people' out. If they had built a wall back in 1925, my father would never have emigrated here, and I would never have been born. Though I try to always preach a gospel of peace, I often fail,

and end up fighting instead. When we are passionate about an issue, we often forget that we are not to be ruled by our passions.

Galatians 5:22-26 says, “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each other.” I know, those words bring me little comfort when I am ticked off at some post I read on Facebook. It’s hard to be loving and peaceful and kind and gentle and self-controlled when someone is spewing hate on every TV channel. Sometimes, it seems too hard, and I want to give in to the anger and just let ’em have it. I want to let my fleshly fears rage, and ignore the Spirit of peace.

But our call is to rise above the fear and hurt, above the anger and rage that our earthly selves are so good at. Like our wonderful First Lady, Michelle Obama said the other day, “We explain to our daughters that when someone is cruel or acts like a bully, you don’t stoop to their level. No, our motto is, when they go low, we go high.” It’s OK to disagree, but we don’t have to be disagreeable.

The Christian life, the life that Jesus lived and calls us to follow him on, is hard. It’s not a broad, flat, freshly-paved blacktop road - easy on the legs and full of other runners, no, the Christian life is a rocky road, and not even a road. A rocky, uphill path. The kind that’s barely wide enough for one person to climb up, with that rut where your feet are supposed to go but there’s too many rocks jutting up and there’s no space big enough for even one foot let alone two. It’s covered in dirt and pine needles, slippery to the point of treacherous. The path is so narrow that the bushes and trees on either side constantly scrape and poke you, and you get leaves in your eyes and dirt all over your hot, sweaty skin. This is not a glamorous life; it’s gritty and demanding...and you are going to get hurt. Yes, you are. You are going to get skinned knees, scraped arms, maybe even a metaphorical broken bone or two. But if we live out the gospel as Jesus, our example, showed us, if we in sacrificial humility and deference to a higher power, we can be peacemakers even in the midst of strong disagreement.

As the book of James says in chapter 3, verse 17, “But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. Peacemakers who sow in peace reap a harvest of righteousness.”

I feel like this is a good place to end this sermon, and end my time as Andy’s sabbatical stand-in. They say every preacher really only has three sermons in them, and this is certainly one of mine: when they cry for war, try to make peace. It’s not an easy job, but it IS the job and the life we are called to as Christians. We may disagree, and conversations may get pretty heated, but don’t give in to fear and hate. Rise above. Be the Church. Be the hands and feet of Jesus here on earth. Amen.