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Zion Lutheran Church, Youngstown, Ohio

**Weekend of Sunday, August 14, 2022**  
**10<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost/Lectionary 20/Year C**

**First Reading: Jeremiah 23:23-29**

**Second Reading: Hebrews 11:29-12:2**

**Gospel Reading: Luke 12:49-56**

**Sermon Title: “What Would Jesus Do?”**

## **Theme**

*Jesus delivers harsh words about the purifying and potentially divisive effects of obedience to God’s call. The way of the cross often leads followers to encounter hostility and rejection, even from those they love.*

## **Text**

[Jesus said:] <sup>49</sup>“I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! <sup>50</sup>I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what stress I am under until it is completed! <sup>51</sup>Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division! <sup>52</sup>From now on five in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three; <sup>53</sup>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.”

<sup>54</sup>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. <sup>55</sup>And when you see the south wind blowing, you say, ‘There will be scorching heat’; and it happens. <sup>56</sup>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

I checked. Three years ago, the last time this Gospel Reading came up, I told you it was among my least favorite readings and I refused to preach on it. So I didn't. I preached on the First Reading from Jeremiah. So, I guess I can't take that tack again!

Do you remember how I took time at the beginning of last week's sermon to set the stage for that Gospel Reading that included that beloved passage, <sup>32</sup> *“Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom.* Do you remember that? Before that passage, Jesus had been harassed by the Pharisees and scribes, and Luke added that they laid in wait for him to catch him in a mistake! And after some vitriolic dialogue between himself and his enemies, he seemed to remember that the throng of people who were listening included his own disciples and peasant Jews, and so he gathered his composure and told them, (excluding the Pharisees and scribes), <sup>32</sup> *“Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom.*

Well, unless Luke forgot to include something, Jesus went right back to his irritated and hostile state in this passage that is today's Gospel Reading, and just to be clear, it follows last week's Gospel Reading directly. And because we in the church don't read them as one continuous conversation, this week the lectionary editors have given us this passage, that I do not like. Without context, Jesus just sounds angry and malevolent, and we all know that is not the Jesus we want to call the Lord of our lives and use as the example for us to follow. So what is going on? I'm so glad you asked.

From the very beginning of his public ministry, Jesus proclaimed what his mission was. In Luke 4:18, Jesus quoted the Old Testament prophet Isaiah in the synagogue of his hometown of Nazareth. He took the scroll and read,

4:18" The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,  
because he has anointed me  
to bring good news to the poor.  
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives  
and recovery of sight to the blind,

to let the oppressed go free,  
<sup>19</sup>to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

If you remember that story, things didn't go well for Jesus that day. His own townsfolk tried to kill him. And that is how he started his ministry.

So there we have Jesus' mission statement, and then he went out and started doing it, and training up his disciples to do the same. As you look at it, be reminded that these weren't even Jesus's own words, he quoted Isaiah! And, as you look at it, is there anything offensive written there? No! All these mission points are virtuous and godly, right?

But remember who is in the crowd. It was a mixed crowd of thousands of Jews; many, probably the majority were common peasant Jews. Most were the poor and they stayed that way because they were taxed into poverty by both their Roman overlords and by Judaism's sacrificial and Temple tax system. They, the peasant class of Jews, no doubt, loved it when Jesus got angry with the religious professionals and the aristocratic class.

I doubt there were captives within hearing distance, but the peasant class and all Jews for that matter were captive to their Roman overlords, but Jesus rarely railed against the Romans, they weren't the problem! However, Jesus was often angry with the religious professionals and the aristocratic class of Jews, including the priesthood who were among the wealthiest class of Jewish society. They were the ones who kept the poor captive in their poverty and ignorance.

Luke doesn't say folks were lining up for miracle healings that day, but there probably were. By the time of this passage, he had already gained a reputation as a miracle healer. Indeed in the next chapter, he will find himself in trouble once again because he had the nerve to heal a woman on the Sabbath!

Likely the majority of the crowd was oppressed by someone, and once again, I'm going to say, it was the religious professionals and the aristocratic class of Jews, including the priesthood who oppressed the majority peasant class of Jews.

So why is everyone so upset? Jesus is just doing what he said he would do; doing his God-given mission!

Because the religious professionals and the aristocratic class of Jews, including the priesthood don't want him to:

bring good news to the poor.  
proclaim release to the captives  
recovery of sight to the blind,  
let the oppressed go free,  
and proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

They like things the way they are! If the poor become rich, then what is so special about being rich?

If everyone is free to live as they please then there is no privileged class.

If Jesus heals all those who are sick, blind, and lame then the privileged class will have no one to look down on.

If all people who they have oppressed and imprisoned because of their lack of conformity to societal norms are set free, then the streets and homes of the privileged class are not safe anymore.

You see, there is no motivation for them to change the system that works for them, and they have all the power. So Jesus was attacking those who were capitalizing on the poor, jailing the non-conformists, ignoring the sick, the lame, and the blind, and oppressing people they didn't like. Do you see what this story is all about?

It's not about us, right? We get a pass, right?

The reason I don't like this passage is that we have been taught in the church that all scripture applies to *us!* We will not be let off that easily.

The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. once said, "It is appalling that the most segregated hour of Christian America is 11 on Sunday morning." To that, I would add, or 5 on Saturday evening, or 9:30 on Sunday morning as the case may be.

- Are you aware that we have lost members because of our relationship with NBOM?
- Are you aware that we lost members when I spoke out against violence against young black men?
- Are you aware that we lost members because we have LGBTQ+ folks in membership?
- Are you aware that we lost members because we followed public health leadership when we shut down and required masks?
- Are you aware that we are very middle-class or above, and the people that we serve at Food Distribution probably don't feel welcome here?
- Are you aware that right across the street is a recovery center for people who struggle with addiction and most of them probably don't feel welcome here?
- Are you aware that you and I are addicted to sin and are no better than they are?

If we were honest, we might have to say that we don't really embrace Jesus' mission statement from Isaiah, because to bring everybody up to our level, means that we wouldn't be special anymore. If everybody is privileged, is anyone privileged?

So Jesus told the crowd, the whole crowd, including you and me:

<sup>49</sup>“I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! <sup>50</sup>I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what stress I am under until it is completed! <sup>51</sup>Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division!

And I conclude that that division he spoke of is ... those who get on board with his mission and those who don't. It is as simple as that.

It may mean *father against son, and daughter against mother*, each one of us has to make up our own minds. No one will be standing beside us when we get our moments in front of the seat of judgment.

## **Raisin' the Bar Challenge**

Maybe a good place to end an examination of this passage from Luke is to look again at the Prayer of the Day. Say it with me this time:

O God, judge eternal, you love justice and hate oppression, and you call us to share your zeal for truth. Give us courage to take our stand with all victims of bloodshed and greed, and, following your servants and prophets, to look to the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, your Son, Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen.

This prayer reminds us of what Jesus's mission really is. I entitled this sermon, "What Would Jesus Do?" There it is.

*If* for us, Jesus is the Christ, God's anointed, and our Lord, then what matters to him ought to matter to us. And if he loves justice and hates oppression, then so ought we. Do you do that?

*If* he has zeal for the truth, then so ought we. Are you able to see the truth, free of your own bias and your own set of societal norms?

In this prayer, we ask God to give us courage to stand with victims of bloodshed and greed, following the saints and prophets of old. Are you that courageous?

And finally, the prayer calls Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. This means that through his life and example, his passion, and resurrection, Jesus has set the bar for all Christians to follow.

I know, that is an impossible task, but there is grace for when we fail. So knowing there is grace when we fail, ought to make us want to try all the more, don't you think?

## **Prayer**

O God, judge eternal, you love justice and hate oppression, and you call us to share your zeal for truth. Give us courage to take our stand with all victims of bloodshed and greed, and, following your servants and prophets, to look to the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, your Son, Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen.