

"Hard Words From Jesus" (Luke 12:49-56)

In the Name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

After reading aloud today's Gospel reading, our deacon may have been tempted to say The Gospel of the Lord with question mark at the end. These hard words of Jesus which speak of Jesus bringing a sword of division do not sound like very good news to us.

However these words served as a wake-up call to Jesus' hearers and they serve as a wake-up call to us. They are a reminder that the choice to follow Jesus sometimes causes division.

In the Gospel for today, our Lord spoke about a baptism which He would have to endure. This baptism was Jesus' death for the sin of the world. Jesus even said, "And what stress I am under until this baptism is completed."

Jesus' hearers and we shouldn't be surprised as Jesus takes on this prophetic role. We have all probably heard of the term "tough love". Tough love means doing the right thing even when it's not pleasant. In parenting, it is disciplining our children even when they temporarily dislike us for doing so. It is tough love that we see this prophetic Jesus talking about in today's Gospel. Sometimes, Jesus says, tough love, doing the right thing even when it's hard, will divide families. The unfortunate reality is that some persons will choose darkness when God's light breaks in, and the different choices that people make will no doubt cause some friction between them.

Of course, people don't have to be "bad people" to choose the darkness over the light. Sometimes people just don't understand as

Jesus taught in the parable of the sower. Sometimes God's Word in people falls on hard hearts, hearts that are not open to God. Even God's Word cannot penetrate a heart that is closed. However we believe in a loving God who makes allowances for this hardness of heart because God knows each and every one of us intimately. In fact, we believe in a God who can soften the hardest heart in God's time.

Sometimes, Jesus said, the cares and riches of this world choke out God's Word. In other words, we can be so focused on the cares of this life and the acquisition of more, that the Word can't find a place to dwell in us. This is particularly hard for us in the U.S. We know that this consumer lifestyle that has escalated out of control cannot be sustained. Our way of life has sneaked up on us, hasn't it? As our personal wealth has increased and/or as our credit has increased, we bought more and bigger because we could. We, in the Western world are a small percentage of the world's population yet we are consuming the vast majority of the world's resources. I recently heard that for everyone on planet earth to live as we are living it would take the resources of 4-7 planet earths.

Jesus talked about a third situation in the parable of the sower where the Word was overcome by trauma or persecution. Something bad happened in the person's life and he or she blamed God and fell away from the faith. For this reason, during December of this year, we are going to be considering the trials of life together. Trials of life are supposed to make us stronger as people of faith. And knowing this will help us face trials with our trust in God, rather than feeling forsaken by God. Remember Jesus promised never to leave us nor forsake us.

In our Gospel reading, Jesus says to his hearers, “When you see a cloud rising in the west, you immediately say, ‘It is going to rain; and so it happens. And when you see the south wind blowing, you say, ‘There will be scorching heat and it happens. 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?’” The implication here is that God’s people should have known how to interpret the present time, what was going on around them. They had the witness of the Law and the Prophets to guide them.

Walter Bruggemann, one of today’s foremost Old Testament scholars says that we need to hear again this message of the prophets.

Bruggemann thinks that we are asleep spiritually, anesthetized in many ways by our affluence and the false ideologies of our culture. We keep ourselves so busy working and when we are not busy working, we are busy keeping ourselves entertained. Our work and entertainment keep us distracted so that, he says, we don’t see that our culture is dying around us. We need to hear the call of the prophets like Amos who said “Woe to you who lounge around on ivory beds while the poor are starving just outside your gates.” Brueggemann reminds us that God says this way of life is not sustainable.

He says that the first step in the way back to God is to wake up and to acknowledge how out of synch we are with God’s ways, how out of synch we are with the teachings of Jesus and the prophets. Then, and only then, can we heed the call to turn from our way to God’s way.

I was reminded of the book *The Little Prince* where the little prince noticed that there were many things in life that did not matter at all.

But he also noticed other things which he called “matters of consequence” which really ARE important. Amos reminded his hearers that when God’s people are wealthy while the poor are starving around them, this is a matter of great consequence where God is concerned.

Many of the matters of consequence which are happening in our world today are so heinous that they can’t be talked about in homilies where our children are present in their innocence. But, we must talk about them as people of faith if we are going to follow Jesus into the midst of them and make a difference as God’s people in this world. We also need our shared wisdom gained in honest dialogue together. I hope to begin some of these dialogues about these important issues during the month of October.

Let me give you one example of these matters of consequence which I can talk about with children present. There was a women’s prayer group in Los Angeles that met in their homes in a neighborhood that was becoming increasingly unsafe due to gang violence.

Picture these little old Latina ladies in their prayer group talking about an upcoming battle between rival gangs in their neighborhood. Suddenly, one of the ladies said, “I know what we can do. I know what Jesus wants us to do. Jesus wants us to go out and stand between those rival gangs.” The other women in the group responded, “You must be crazy! We wouldn’t last two seconds out there!” Well, you can guess what happened. They decided pray about it and eventually they all decided that Jesus was indeed calling them to go out there and stand between the two groups.

So, there they went, that little band of Latina ladies out into the streets of their neighborhood there in L.A. to get between the rival gang members. They went out there in the midst of it all. Now these young gang members had all had rough lives. But, they had also been brought up in this culture where if they knew anything, they knew better than to cross these little old women. Well, one thing led to another, and these courageous women got the rival gangs on speaking terms and eventually they began neighborhood celebrations where everyone could come together, to eat and dance and be with their friends, and even to be with those whom they had considered their enemies. Beloved, that's what it meant for these women to actualize the Kingdom of God in a tough part of Los Angeles.

Now, they will be the first to tell you that it didn't solve all the problems. It did not create a Utopia, BUT the difference is night and day compared to what it had been before these ladies ventured out with Jesus into their neighborhood.

As we listen to the Spirit of God, as we seek to follow Jesus and make a difference in the world around us, it will be interesting to see where and how our Lord calls us to actualize the Kingdom here in Asheville as we consider the present age, the world around us and how God can use us, even us, to make a positive difference in this world.

May God give us grace to hear the call of Jesus and to be obedient to that call. AMEN.