

Jesus the Arsonist
Luke 12:49-56
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Rev. Dr. Kory Wilcoxson

I usually end a scripture reading with, “My God bless the reading and understanding of this word.” Today, that’s more of an urgent plea than a request. Wow. This is the kind statement that I wish Luke would have forgotten to write down. Couldn’t some Middle Ages monk making copies of the Bible by hand had a cramp and skipped this part? Just because Jesus said it doesn’t mean it has to be written down. I’m sure at some point he said, “Hey Peter, pass the ketchup” but they left that out. Why not leave this out, too?

I first preached on this passage back in 2012 as part of a sermon series called, either provocatively or idiotically, “Jesus Was Not a Nice Guy.” And boy, did I catch some flak for that title. I had a few people in the congregation tell me I shouldn’t talk about Jesus like that. When he says something mean, I should just say, “Bless his heart.” I told them, “Hey, look, I didn’t put these words in the Bible! Yell at Luke, not me.”

What is so troubling about this passage is the same thing that is troubling about a lot of Jesus’ edgier statements. This is not what we expect from our Savior. These are not the words of comfort and assurance that we want to hear from Jesus. We want Jesus to divide and separate us from our enemies, to draw a line that clearly marks us vs. them. We don’t want him to say it’s going to be us vs. us!

Isaiah wrote, “For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.” Where’s our Prince of Peace now? He’s the one shouting, “Do you think I came to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division!” Isaiah’s words were a prophecy about the Messiah, but instead of a Prince of Peace, what we have here is a Consulate of Conflict, a Deputy Director of Division. Can we just go back to little baby Jesus, the one cooing in the manger? I liked him a lot better.

But if we’ve been paying attention, we know that this is not out of character for Jesus. From the beginning, he has always troubled people. His birth troubled King Herod so much that Herod killed all the first-born males to try and eliminate the threat of Jesus. At the beginning of his ministry, Jesus stood up in the synagogue and said, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor, release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed...” Powerful words. Did the congregation throw him a cookie-and-punch reception? Luke says, “They were filled with wrath. And they rose up and put him out of the city and led him to the brow of a hill on which their city was built, that they might throw him down headlong.” Geez. If you don’t like my sermons, could you just give me a disapproving look instead of trying to throw me off a cliff?

Jesus preached and taught against the status quo, he healed people on the Sabbath, he confronted the evil of the religious and political leaders. Did he get a commendation? No, he got a condemnation. Jesus was arrested, tried, and crucified for disturbing the peace. So if we’ve been paying attention to his life and ministry, these words today shouldn’t be so surprising. As the Message translates it, “Do you think I came to smooth things over and make everything nice? Not so. I’ve come to disrupt and confront.”

I believe we need to hear this today. Jesus didn’t die so we could give up something or make a few changes. Faith isn’t supposed to be this toothless thing we do on Sunday. Jesus died

so we would be transformed from the inside out. Author Marianne Williamson states this eloquently when she says, “When you ask God into your life, you think God is going to come into your psychic house, look around, and see that you just need a new floor or better furniture, and that everything needs just a little cleaning – and so you go along thinking how nice life is that God is there. Then you look out the window one day and you see that there’s a wrecking ball outside. It turns out your foundation is shot and that you’re going to have to start building it from scratch.”

As a preacher, I love that quote. As a follower of Christ, I hate it because of what it means. It means that if I truly want to open my life to Jesus, if I truly want to experience the joy and the new life the resurrection will bring, I have to be willing to do more than let Jesus rearrange a few chairs. I have to let him set fire to things, maybe even the close relationships that distract me from living out my faith.

That’s an interesting metaphor for Jesus to use in our passage because fire has so many different meanings. You can use fire to roast marshmallows or burn people at the stake. You can use a candle to provide light or to set a cross on fire. You can light a fire in a big wood stove to heat a whole house or use the embers from a cigarette to destroy one. One of the things Jesus brings to his followers is a sense of urgency and priority, burning away the things that don’t matter so we can focus on the things that do.

But, as Jesus so starkly tells us, that leads to division, even with those closest to us. And that’s troubling, because Jesus is supposed to help our families, to be the tie that binds us. “The family that prays together stays together.” But what I hear Jesus saying is that if we truly give ourselves over to him, if we truly let him disrupt and confront, we may find ourselves on the other side of the fence from those we love. It’s like two drops of rain coming down side by side that land on either side of a pitched roof and ending up oceans away from each other.

That seems to be more common in our world today where families are divided over any number of issues in our country and our society. And because families are made up of humans, we hurt each other, we say destructive things, we withhold love and forgiveness. When I work with couples who are getting married, we talk about how their families of origin have a profound influence on them, not always in good ways. Families are messy.

Jesus knows this, because it happened in his own family. Jesus’s family thought he was a little bit crazy, so one day they showed up to bring him home. Luke says, “Then his mother and his brothers came to him, but they could not reach him because of the crowd.”²⁰ And he was told, ‘Your mother and your brothers are standing outside, wanting to see you.’²¹ But he said to them, ‘My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it.’” In the book of Jeremiah, God says, “Is not my word like fire, like a hammer that breaks a rock into pieces?” Yes, our faith is meant to comfort, but it also is meant to confront.

That’s the risk of faith that we can so easily forget. Because being a Christian in America today doesn’t automatically come with costs, we may lose sight of the radical, counter-cultural statement we make each time we come through those doors. Back in Jesus’ day, baptism wasn’t some sweet little thing you do, it wasn’t just a perfunctory rite of passage. In the early church, being baptized meant you were then eligible to be burned at the stake or fed to the lions because you were a professed Christian. Baptism could cost you everything. Would our Pastor’s Class kids still make that choice today if the stakes were that high? Would you?

What Jesus is telling us here is that there is no middle ground with him. There’s no fence-sitting. If you go through the motions of faith without being willing to pay the price, you’re only play-acting. And that price could include division among families. In the book “Zeitoun,” Dave

Eggers writes about Kathy, an American woman who converts to Islam. He tells about the first time she wore a hijab, the traditional Muslim covering, to a family gathering, and how her mother and sisters ridiculed her and implored her to “take that thing off and be yourself.”

I wonder how our lives would be different if we had to wear our faith as noticeably as Kathy? I wonder what divisions we would encounter if everyone could take one look at us and know who we followed? Original Christians were excommunicated from synagogues and shunned by their own families. There was a cost to belief for them, which made their faith that much more essential to who they were. Is there a cost for us? Does our faith define us, or is it just one small part of who we are, to be put on display or hidden on a shelf, depending on the circumstances?

I believe Jesus is conflicted in this passage today because he knows what he is about to go through – his arrest, his trial, his crucifixion – will cause pain for those who choose to follow him. He’s upset because his followers can look at the sky and predict the weather, but they don’t understand his predictions about what’s about to happen to him and to them. Those who profess belief in him as the Messiah will be mocked, ridiculed, persecuted, beaten, ostracized, and killed. You could say that if your faith isn’t causing you trouble, then you’re not living it right, because a faith fully lived out will always be at odds with the secular and the status quo in our workplaces, our culture, our government, our families.

Authentic faith in Jesus forces choices. It forces us to choose to do the right thing, even if it’s not the popular thing. It forces us to stand up and speak out, even when it would be safer to sit down and stay quiet. It forces us to live out what we believe, even if that means those in our own families won’t accept us. The good news here, as I see it, is that Jesus Christ has given us something worth fighting about, worth standing up for. Jesus has given us a cause, a focus, a way of life that can do more than just arrange a few chairs, it can transform us and transform the world. Jesus knew it wouldn’t be easy. He knew that he was causing trouble, like a hammer that breaks rocks into pieces.

Families divide and hurt and reject for all kinds of reasons today. Sadly, even church families do this. We must do better. Jesus’s family included lepers and tax collectors and Roman centurions and scruffy looking men who smelled like fish and women of ill repute and hordes of squealing children and people grieving losses and people excited about the future. Family was not a matter of DNA and chromosomes, but in whose image you are created. Sure, the early Christians squabbled, but they were always welcome at the table. So are you. If you don’t have a home anywhere else, you have a home here. “My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it.” May that be us, no matter what the cost.