

Sermon on Luke 12:49-56
13th Sunday after Pentecost, August 14, 2016
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer
By James Erlandson

I don't imagine any of you have come to worship today "looking for a fight!" Are you? Most of us come to church on Sunday looking for peace. I think I'm right about this! Now, some people in our world do come to the church on a Sunday expecting some divisiveness – or to find people at odds over some issue or another. Have you ever heard of a "church fight"? It does happen! Congregations can become divided over issues of biblical interpretation or hymn selection, over politics, a change in policy or procedure, or the calling of a pastor. That's when the stakes are important. But sometimes people fight over silly things, like worship furnishings, who gets to make a decision, personality differences, or who didn't clean up the kitchen properly after a church event. Luckily, we haven't had any issue like that around here for a few years – at least none that anyone has told me about! But we know that churches do become divided – and it's not pretty! In the past, it was seldom fun to go to Synod Assemblies or Churchwide Assemblies, because not only was the agenda ruled by Roberts Rules of Order, but we fought over worship, ordination and sex. That kept us divided for years! But it also drove some congregations away.

It's quieter now, on the churchwide front. Our Synod Assemblies in St. Paul have almost been boring – too much agreement, perhaps – and become commercials for what the Synod is doing for us these days. And the ELCA Churchwide Assembly – after the 2005 worship wars before the new red hymnal was finally approved (did we really need another book?), and the 2009 decision BY ONE VOTE to approve ordination for gay clergy in committed relationships – all that is behind us now! So at THIS year's Churchwide Assembly, our own Joann Conroy has reported that the Assembly almost unanimously approved the repudiation of the 1493 Doctrine of Discovery (in which Pope Alexander issued a Papal Bull that took away the rights of natives in the America's to have claim to their own lands!). (And to think that in 1862 we banished all the Dakota from Minnesota after a violent summer of war.) Not only that, the ELCA Churchwide Assembly in New Orleans just voted 931-9 to approve a Joint Lutheran-Catholic Declaration on the Way of 32 points of agreement with the Roman Catholic Church on church, ministry and eucharist, 500 years after the Reformation and centuries of ecclesiastical division. Things are downright peaceful in the Church!!!!

So, maybe it's time for us to come to worship in a peaceful church, where we can hear God's Word, sing hymns, and share the body and blood of Christ to receive the "peace of Christ" – which we share several times every Sunday! We begin

worship invoking the peace of Christ, we share the peace of Christ before receiving holy communion, and we close worship with a blessing of “*Go in peace. Serve the Lord.*” We come to worship seeking peace and comfort here in this place, which we call the house of God, away from the divisions, the struggles, and the challenges of life outside these doors. No, we don’t want divisions here – often division in the church drives us away, because we expect to find the peace of God in this place, if nowhere else! For most of us come to the church as a *sanctuary* – a “holy place” set apart for you and me to meet with God to pray, hear God’s word and sing our Creator’s praises – apart from the noise and divisiveness of the world around us.

So what does it mean that Jesus tells his disciples in the gospel today to say “*I have come to bring fire to the earth!...Do you think I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division!...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.*” Really, Jesus? Is this the same person who said “Peace be with you” to his disciples at the Last Supper, and when he appeared to them after his resurrection from the dead?

This is truly a great paradox! Thankfully, we are Lutherans – and living in paradox is normal to us! We love the gray areas, the misunderstandings, and when two opposite thoughts can both equally be true, we are most happy! That Jesus came to bring both the peace of God, and we have division because of it, well, what could be better than that for us to ponder today? I know, you’d rather that your truth would be black or white, or clearly one thing and not the other, right? That’s what most people want, and seek from the truth! That’s why many go to church. But you and me? We want to know the real truth, which includes wisdom that can come from both sides of a question. For we are Lutherans! And although Jesus brings to us the key to knowing the truth of God, the heart of all wisdom, it is equally true that the truth brings great division, because not one of us can claim to have the corner on the full truth! I know that I don’t!

So we recognize that most of us are seeking peace and comfort today, through the truth of God’s Word, in Christ Jesus. There’s nothing wrong with that. Jesus even encourages this, in most of the gospels! But today, in this passage, Jesus says that even though it is good to seek the ultimate peace of God, there is a caution, here. It is found in what I call the theology of “*Yes, but!*” This is true, but every truth has an exception! For every majority opinion has a minority dissent (as we see in all Supreme Court decisions).

The truth of God’s mercy, compassion, and unconditional love for all people, without exception, can lead us to our ultimate peace with God. (As we read in Paul’s letter to the Romans, chapter 5, “*Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.*” But Jesus also had experienced

division and the anger of his own people in Nazareth when he had preached his first sermon in his home synagogue. When he quoted the prophet Isaiah, to say he had come to bring good news to the poor, everyone spoke well of him. But then Jesus became specific, preaching about those times when God's favor came to those who were NOT Jews, when Gentiles were cleansed and not God's people, and the people in the synagogue became enraged, got up and were ready to throw Jesus, their hometown prophet, off the edge of a cliff! The same thing happened when Jesus challenged the hypocrisy of religious leaders. The good news of God that Jesus shared often brought division – and in the end, led him to death on the cross!

So, Jesus warned his disciples to think clearly about what his “peace” meant when he said it. To Jesus “peace” began with the good news of justice and compassion for those who were poor and oppressed among his people – oppressed not only by the Romans, but also by their own religious leaders. Do you know what the *Roman Pax* was – the Roman “peace”? It was the “peace” that came as the absence of war – enforced by the power of Roman legions, who came to occupy a country by force, in exchange for “peace”. This peace meant that the legal language became Latin and not Hebrew or Aramaic. A nation's own laws, culture and religious traditions were second to the laws, culture and religion of Rome (which was to worship Roman gods and Caesar). That's not really peace – it is oppression, bringing safety only to those who bowed down or were enriched by it. If you rebelled, questioned or challenged Rome – there was the cross.

Jesus told the truth – the whole truth – that the peace of God which he proclaimed was not based on selling out to the Roman *pax*, but challenged it with the truth of God – meaning justice and compassion for all, no matter how much of an “outcast” you are. He also just didn't “blame the Romans” for all their troubles. Jesus challenged his followers to look deep inside themselves, and the society they lived in – even their core beliefs! Being a witness for this kind of peace could only bring division and controversy to his followers – were they ready for this? Even if it brought division to their own families – to parents who held to their Jewish faith when their children followed Jesus' new path? Were they prepared for the cost?

How about you – and me? Are we ready for the cost that proclaiming Jesus truth – which includes not only the peace of God but also God's justice, compassion and inclusion? Today there is plenty of controversy and division in society, brought to the front pages of newspapers and dinner tables in every home, in this election year. Every household may be divided by this presidential election, when candidates raise fears about their opponents, and some use fear of our neighbors and of immigrants and Muslims as a campaign strategy. How much division is caused in communities and churches when saying the words “Black Lives Matter” is interpreted as meaning other lives matter less, or police lives don't matter, when it started as a movement to simply say “Stop Killing Us?” When we want to bring

Christian “values” from the church out into our daily lives, but we can’t agree on what those “Christian values” are? Are we ready to look deep inside ourselves, and test the assumptions we make about faith, or challenge the privileges we enjoy? Oh, yes, there is division alright, mainly because the truth and the peace of Christ can be a very complicated thing both to proclaim and to live! Especially when they mean opposite things to many of us!

That’s why respecting the understanding of others and the complexities of God’s truth are so crucial! It’s not that the truth of God is complex (it’s simple – but a great mystery!) – it is essentially the truth that God is love! The complexity comes in when we all have different understandings and beliefs about how God’s truth and love are defined and lived out!

So can we live in peace, while we seek the truth of God and live justly with one another, with love for God and neighbor? That is the question! As we look at our own individual lives, this is how we seek to live when we leave this place of worship and exist in our world this coming week. It is also how we approach our future as a congregation in the coming days, weeks, months and years. How shall we live as people of faith, baptized in the name of Christ, seeking the truth of God, proclaiming God’s justice and trying to decide what that is, while attempting to live as witnesses to the peace of Christ in the world? It seems so very complicated, even as it is so simple at the same time! (As the saying goes: the goal may be simple, but the devil’s in the details!)

So may we continue to follow Jesus as a Church and as individuals, bringing good news to the poor, release to the captives, sight to the blind, freedom for the oppressed, and God’s mercy to all people – realizing that the good news of God’s peace that we proclaim may not be received as peace by others, and that division is always a possibility. May we have the courage to proclaim this good news despite the division, and share the peace of God in Christ Jesus with the world! Amen.