

Divisions – really Jesus? Really??

Today's reading is a cautionary tale about taking a reading literally. If you look at the imagery of today's reading: fire needing to be kindled, division in households, baptism that is described as "stressful". THEN Jesus goes on to talk about predicting the skies and yet the inability to understand that which is happening in front of our eyes.

At first blush, there's not a lot of good news here, is there?

How many of you remember your baptism? Many of us were less than a year old when we were "washed free of sin" as it were. Some of us are fortunate enough to remember our baptism. For those that remember it, how would you describe it?

Powerful? Exciting? Frightening?

I was six months old and do not remember my baptism. I am told that my parents waited until the last minute to put on the brand-new Christening gown that came from England. And then I barfed on it. So, my mother wiped up as best she could then sprayed me down with Chanel No. 5 to cover the stench of baby vomit.

I wonder if that's why I can't stand the scent of Chanel No. 5?

Anyway, when I began the process of testing a call for ordination, I had to be Confirmed. It was "traditionally" done at the age of 12 or 13. During that time we were preparing to move across the province of Ontario and when we did move we didn't find a Church, so it was never pursued.

I remember, very clearly, the day of my Confirmation. It was blazing hot. I had left work early. We were packed into a tiny stone Church in Galt, Ontario. The air did not move and we were all sweating uncomfortably. I remember walking to the front with my Confirmation Sponsor, Beth, kneeling down before the Bishop and looking up into his face. He placed his hands on my head and prayed the words of blessing.

For a brief moment, time stood still. When the Bishop removed his hands, I wanted to snatch them back and put them back on my head. I didn't want that moment to end. Something inexplicable happened that I felt only when I was ordained. I felt, in a very real sense, that I was in the presence of the Divine.

Not in the bishop per se, but knowing the Spirit of God was surrounding me. As I said, I didn't want that moment to end.

I used to love the smell of wood burning. Now, because of the past few years of forest fire season, that smell fills me with dread. Fire can be destructive as we witnessed in Waterton Provincial Park, the multiple fires over the years through Kooacanusa. The community of Litton and the recent spate of fires uncomfortably close to us in the Elk Valley.

Fire can also be used to cleanse and create. A blacksmith needs the fire to be just right in order to heat the metal that will then be formed into whatever the blacksmith's imagination can create. We read of refiner's fire in the Hebrew Scriptures which tells us of the refiner watching the metal that they are melting carefully, watching for the separation of the pure metal and the dross and once the dross is removed, the pure metal remains.

Could that be what Jesus is referring to when he speaks of "I have a baptism with which to be baptised, and what stress I am under until it is completed!" (*Luke 12.50, NRSV*)

Baptism was not a "thing" until Jesus. John the Baptist was the first one to baptise as he was commanded by God. Baptism has, for many years, been considered a sort of party where folks gather to celebrate the baby. For some people baptism is where the child is introduced to God. This is flawed theology. God has known that child since conception and has been with that child throughout the pregnancy. When they drew their first breath the Holy Spirit gave them their "ruah" or breath.

In Jesus' time, baptism was not for children, it was for adults. Keep in mind that Jesus was 30 when he was baptised. Remember that it was an incredibly powerful moment for him. The Holy Spirit descended on him in the form of a dove. God spoke to those assembled "This is my Son, my Beloved, in whom I am well pleased." This was not for Jesus' benefit, but for those who were gathered to know that this was no ordinary guy, this was THE guy.

We now use a liturgy where godparents/sponsors and parents make promises on behalf of the child. For older children and adults, they answer those questions themselves. Confirmation came about as a way for those who were young when they were baptised to have an avenue to declare their own faith. Confirmation is where a teenager or adult "confirms" the promises that were made on their behalf as infants.

The promises made are a big deal. Promising to repent and reject evil and practice faith and love. Promises to love those who are unloveable. Promises to speak for the voiceless, clothe the naked and feed the hungry. These are not simply words; they are commitments made between the person and God; that they will take up the works of Jesus and make the world a kinder and better place. They're a big deal!

This sounds very lovely and pleasant, and yet we know, as people who live in this current dumpster fire of a world, that these promises are difficult to keep in this day and age. Which makes them more important now than ever.

This leads us to the next section of today's reading. Jesus says:

"Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division! From now on, five in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three; they will be divided."

(Luke 12.51-52, NRSV)

This phrase is, well, disconcerting, considering the world in which we live. Jesus is calling for divisions? Did I read that correctly? Father against son, mother against daughter, in-laws versus out-laws? Is he SERIOUS? And this is where the rubber meets the road, as it were. For Jesus, he knows the world is in disarray. He knows there is Roman control that is exhausting everyone. He knows there is a mentality of "us" vs. "them" and that is the largest and most disconcerting of the divisions.

It's easy to talk down about people you do not know. Strangers. Faceless, nameless enemies. Like the keyboard trolls who say outrageous things online while they are anonymous, yet I guarantee, in a room full of people, they would not share their opinions quite as forcefully, if at all.

Jesus is making a clarion call that he is coming to call us into division. Did he mean a literal division between families? Did he really mean that families would be torn apart, never to speak again? What would be causing this?

Division is what we are experiencing now.

The conversation about religion vs spirituality.

Christian vs follower of Jesus.

Large C Catholic vs Small c catholic

Faith vs belief.

Religious vs atheist.

Energy vs. doctrine. And on and on and on. Is Jesus bait and switching?

I believe this reading is a cautionary tale to what happens when things are accepted without question and taken literally without examination. We do know there are families who have been drawn apart because of religion. We know there are families who have been drawn apart because of different denominations and their views on the Bible.

One of the main differences between those believers who are conservative and those who are liberal is very telling of this. Conservative believers tend to see the bible as the inerrant word of God. Inerrant meaning incapable of being wrong. Doctrine, dogma, tradition and rules are the most important. Liberal believers tend to see the bible as a series of stories which have been written by various historical people, not the finger of God. For most liberal believers, "relationship" is much more important than rules, or dogma or doctrine.

This has been "writ large" through the latest Lambeth Conference. This once-a-decade meeting with the Primates or leaders and Bishops of all Anglican provinces around the world, just concluded in Britain. A statement of human relationships was released in the early days of the Conference reinforcing that marriage is seen scripturally and doctrinally as the union of one man and one woman.

As a Queer woman, you can imagine how this felt. Like a slap to the face. Thankfully the Anglican Church of Canada and the Episcopal Church (U.S.) released statements on the heels of the "official" statement stating that while they wished to remain in relationship with the authors of this statement; they could not, in good faith, agree with what had been written. They then went further to say that their 2SLGBTQ+ brothers and sisters were very much an important part of their families of faith, of birth and of choice.

The authors of the statement were primarily from the global south where Christianity is growing exponentially. And where the bible is received as the inerrant word of God. It cannot be questioned and it must be taken literally.

Sigh and here we go again. That will be more fully explored at another time. I don't have the emotional bandwidth for that today.

Why does everything have to be difficult? King Naaman was told he had "leprosy" which could be any kind of skin affliction. His wife's handmaiden recognised the marks on his hands. The King was devastated. If he had leprosy he would not be able to lead. He'd be thrown out from his community and lose his crown. He would lose everything!

The handmaiden sent a message to Elisha that the king was coming to see him. The King and his entourage travelled to Elisha and Naaman was anticipating a one-to-one meeting. Elisha sent a message that to be cured of his leprosy the king had to go and wash three times in the waters of the river Siloam; a river that was outside Naaman's back door. Naaman was sceptical and slightly offended. Firstly, Elisha didn't come to see him directly.

Secondly he was offended because to wash three times in the river in his backyard seems too simple. Surely for the cure to be effective it should be more complicated? Why did Naaman do that? Why did Naaman think that? Why do we?

On Wednesdays we study the lives of female saints. In nearly every case these women had to prove their faith and fidelity, often in opposition to their families. Some of the women were abandoned on the steps to the Church as their family could no longer care for them. In some cases they married into families that did not approve of their piety. They all had to give up a great deal for their faith – often that was their life.

What if we had to do that today? What if, instead of meeting outside on this beautiful day, we had to send messages secretly and gather in remote, secret locations, wary of who we shared the good news with?

How do we do that today? Do we have difficulty in expressing our faith?

Yes, we do. For some of us we are complacent in our faith. We have been doing the same thing, the same way for decades and it's worked out just fine. Why on earth would we change things, simply for the sake of changing them?

Bad news folks: Complacency = laziness

Which is why I poke at you regularly, trying to rouse you to examine things differently, from a different perspective – different denomination, different language, different format. I'm not trying to be difficult - honestly!

Could it be that Jesus is trying to rouse into attention? Jesus talks about divisions within families. He talks about the stress of baptism. Could it be that when Jesus said "Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division!" (*Luke 12:51, NRSV*) What he's really doing is shaking us out of our complacency? The division he is speaking of, we are already enwrapped in?

COVID has shaken us awake in many ways. It forced us into learning a new way of worshipping together. It taught us that we don't need a building to be a Worshipping Community.

COVID has taught us that there are many things that don't matter, especially the minutiae that we get caught up in. How many of us, prior to COVID got caught up in things that felt so important at the time, yet now as we look back, we realise that it wasn't that important after all? I used to twist myself into pretzels trying to get the liturgy perfect. To make sure that every "i" was dotted and every "t" was crossed.

COVID has simplified my faith – if it's not about love, it's not from God. If it's about division and separation from God, then it's not love. Those pretzels I used to twist myself into, I no longer have time for. The liturgy continues to evolve as more resources are made available. It may not be the liturgy that you knew ten years ago, but it is an excellent liturgy.

My preaching has also evolved. I still teach where I can. I still share what I've learned. I still preach from the sacred text and in the context of today's world. I preach from a more emotional place than I ever have. I expose the cracks in the foundation and the differences that are to be pushed back against.

In short, I choose to follow a God who practices love. The rest, while good to know, doesn't really matter at the end of the day.

When I stand before God on the day of judgement, I want God to see, in my heart, that I did my best. I didn't always get it right. I didn't do things I should have and I did and said things that I shouldn't have. Yet my motivation was from love. Just love. Only love. Let the refiners fire burn the rest away.

One of my favourite people died on Friday. Irene was part of our Sparwood Bible Study class. She loved learning about our sacred text and always made observations that were plain spoken and awesome. We were reading through the Book of Judges and she read the part where Yael pretends to care for General Sisera, and once he is asleep she drives a tent peg through his skull pinning him to the ground and of course, killing him.

We would take turns at our Bible Study reading from our individual bibles, all different translations and paraphrases. Irene reads that bit from her Bible in antiquated language, the "thees, thous and thys" and says after a pause. "Well, I bet he didn't try that again." Absolute deadpan.

She is an example of only love. She will be sorely missed. She is predeceased by two sons, one great-grandson and her husband. So proud of her family, she was the Queen in all her glory. Originally from Birmingham she was a proud Brummie who always did her best.

Love first, love foremost, love always.

Thanks be to God.

The Reverend Canon Andrea L. Brennan,
Regional Dean, East Kootenay Region
Incumbent, Elk Valley Ecumenical Shared Ministry
Christ Church Anglican & Fernie Knox United Church, Fernie, BC
Sermon for 14 August 2022 – Pentecost 10
Luke 12.49-56