

Signs of the Times

Luke 12:49-56

Yesterday my son George came over and said that my grandson Gabriel was punished on yesterday and was not able to attend a birthday party. The reasons for his punishment are not so important; the thing that George and Samara was trying to teach him is there are consequences to our behaviors. Our scripture feels like one of those times when Jesus had told those following him that everything was not a bed of roses without thorns!

The beginning of Luke's Gospel proclaims that Jesus would "guide our feet into the way of peace" ([1:79](#)). Near the end of the Gospel, the resurrected Jesus appeared among his followers and offered a benediction of peace ([24:36](#)). Within this framework, how do we understand Jesus' statement that he brought "fire to the earth" ([12:49](#)), division and not peace? How can the one who told a parable of reconciliation between father and son be the same one who sets parents against their children and children against their parents? Did he not bless with peace the sick whom he healed ([7:50](#); [8:48](#))? Did he not teach his followers to bring greetings of peace as they traveled the country to share his good news ([10:5-6](#))? In light of his own example and the testimony of his preaching, what can Jesus' words of division and signs of the times possibly mean?

Jesus, who had rebuked James and John for wanting to bring down fire on unwelcoming Samaritans, suddenly declared that he could not wait to bring down fire himself. Can you hear James and John complaining, "How come *you* get to when we do not?" Was the fire that Jesus brings a baptism of fire like the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, burning in the hearts and upon the heads of numerous believers, enflaming them to mighty deeds of faithfulness (cf. [3:16](#))? Was it, rather, the

refiner's fire, burning away the chaff of sin or the fruitless branches that do not bear fruit (cf. 3:9, 17)? Was it the fire of judgment, raining down from heaven upon the heads of God's enemies (cf. 17:28-33)?

Worse, the one whose birth was heralded by an angelic chorus of "peace on earth" proceeded to announce *not* peace, but *division* and spelled that out in assorted vignettes of domestic dispute that sound not at all family-values friendly (vv. 52-53). Jesus' saying may be *descriptive* rather than *prescriptive*. That is, it was not Jesus' purpose to set children against their parents, or parents against their children, but this sort of rupture can be the result of the changes engendered by Christ's work. Luke's Gospel includes the Prodigal Son, a parable about a younger son and his father, long estranged by the son's actions, who are reconciled at the end (15:11-32). Even their reconciliation bore the seeds of rupture, as their renewed relationship resulted in division between elder son and father. Jesus' teaching in our scripture reflects that same reality.

We do not like it when those we deem undeserving receive the abundant grace promised to all. We want others to be punished for their sin, while we expect to be welcomed into the heavenly home and don't expect to see our enemies in heaven! Jealousy, anger, desire for revenge, resistance to change: these can consume us in the face of the gospel, to the point that we find ourselves antagonists against those whom Jesus welcomes.

Jesus' teaching also speaks to the reality of a kinship based not on familial blood ties, but on a covenant of Jesus' blood (22:20). Even among his own people, where he is known as "Joseph's son" (4:22), Jesus became an outsider when he announced his mission from God. And when his own mother and brothers try to get close to him, he redefined the familial ties that bind his true family to him: "My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it" (8:21). What ties believers together is not the covenant of lineage but the covenant of

blood, poured out for those who find fellowship in the family of God. **Audrey West**

Jesus' emphatic words on division (in 12:51-53) are to be understood in relationship to core social realities of the first-century world. In that world, whether in Jewish or Gentile realms, the household was the fundamental building block for society. Indeed, the household was regarded as a microcosm of social reality. By claiming to bring not peace but division (v. 51) and then illustrating such divisions in terms of the household (vv. 52-53), Jesus declared that his mission was not the affirmation of the current social status quo but meant its complete obliteration. This would mean the complete collapse of current structures (as in 11:17-18). These divisions were generational, so that no longer would one's identity, vocation, allegiance, and status automatically be predetermined by family ties. Instead, these will be determined by one's positive or negative stance toward Jesus.

The divinely wrought peace that Jesus inaugurated and bestowed involved the establishment of proper relationships of mercy, compassion, and justice between God and humanity. Not everyone, however, wants or welcomes this divine peace plan. The initiation of Jesus' peace agenda also triggers contentious disunity and fissures among all facets of society, right down to the societal core of the household. The fact that such divisions include both men and women reinforce our understanding that both men and women respond either positively or negatively to God's agenda initiated in Jesus' mission and extended through the mission of the disciples. So decisive religious decision making was no longer the exclusive prerogative of males of the household.

Then, Jesus started calling people names again: "hypocrites!" this time, instead of "you fool!" A case could be made for the former name-calling when the rich man was poor toward God; but the apparent criticism on this occasion is even more

puzzling. What exactly rendered a right reading of the weather, coupled with an inability to "interpret the present time," *hypocritical*? **David J. Schlafer**

We have been following the scriptures of Luke all summer and know that a decisive turn occurred, when Jesus "set his face to go to Jerusalem." Although we are far removed from Holy Week, the proper backdrop for this text rests with those final days leading up to Good Friday. Jesus' single-minded determination was a passion we recognize and often admire. It is like that of the neighborhood activist who goes to work to clean up a block in her city after a child dies in a drive-by shooting. It is similar to the passion of the senior citizen who single-handedly takes on the local merchants to make it easier for elders to purchase fresh produce in their neighborhoods. It is like activists making sure that children affected by the water crisis are helped long after the television cameras stop rolling. It is akin to the zeal of the elementary school student who challenges people to go "green" and is relentless in her presentations to all who will listen. Some things matter so much that only focused attention and strong speech can carry the prophet's message.

Jesus chastised the crowds for seeking a sign from him to test the validity of his ministry. In our scripture he chastised the crowds for their complete inability to interpret the divine activity unfolding in their midst. Their interpretive failings were compounded by the fact that though they know how to interpret the harbingers of impending weather patterns (vv. 54-55), they had failed to interpret the harbinger of God's eschatological judgment as it unfolds in the social disruptions caused by the ministry of Jesus.

These harsh sayings and indictments remind us that Jesus has not come to validate the social realities and values we have constructed. Such social realities and values have a tendency to seek a harmony that favors those who hold positions of power at the expense of those who are powerless and expendable. Jesus' missional agenda of compassion, mercy, and justice shatters such a status quo. His

was a missional agenda that compels him toward his divine destiny to be accomplished in his death and resurrection. It was the agenda that resulted in divisions and contentions on all levels of society, as people either embrace or are repelled by what God did and is doing through Jesus. It is the agenda that we are called to recognize in the present in anticipation of God's future. It is the agenda that causes us to reinterpret what God is truly about in the person of Jesus, and so to reinterpret who we are and what we are about as disciples of Jesus. **Richard P. Carlson**

Jesus was willing and did die for us and for this creation. That Jesus has no patience with those who do not grasp the urgency of his pilgrimage to Jerusalem, his mission there, and his life's work is no surprise. **Patricia J. Lull**

My brother and sisters we need to read the signs of the times and be urgent in our ministry in the reign of God and make God's will our will.

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