

***“Christian Politics”***

**(Pr 15) 10<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost – August 15, 2019 – Luke 12:49-56/C**

If you looked at the sermon title today with dread, you might find the next few minutes uncomfortable, but I promise, when it's over (by the grace of God) you will say to yourself, *“Well, that wasn't so bad.”*

Today, I am going to talk a little politics – I have to. You pay me to interpret the Holy Scriptures, and mostly, over the past 29 years, I have kept *partisan* politics out of my preaching – even to demurring when it came to issues of justice that are clearly articulated in the Bible. But, if you think that faith, the church and politics are not, and should not be intertwined, ever, for any reason, then you'd better go and tear this particular story out of your Bible. Because Jesus was a political person. (To clarify, I am using the term “politics” to mean how we participate in life together - the choices we make in ordering our society and the way we conduct ourselves in community.)

In that pure sense of life in the “polis,” Jesus was a political animal – always trying to bring about a better life for everyone in his community and his father's world. Sometimes, that even meant clashing with the ruling authorities. But even before he began his public ministry, John the Baptist, famous for baptizing with water, said of Jesus, *“He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit, and with fire.”* In today's story from Luke, we hear Jesus yearning for that very Holy Spirit fire to be kindled, and warning the disciples what the effect of that kindling will be: division, right down to the building block of Jewish society, households. Jesus' demeanor is not one of peacemaker, for he is about to lay down his life for his friends, for you and me. This is his passion: people. The children of God. His brothers and sisters, his siblings, his household. And it was that deep love which put him in the public eye - squarely at odds with religious leaders, Temple police, evil spirits and possessing demons, local authorities and finally with the Roman Empire.

In fact, the only folks who he didn't upset were those who had no hope: Tenant farmers and fishermen, shepherds, lepers and the unclean; outcast, possessed; the walking dead, poverty stricken and aliens. They loved him because he did not practice the expectations of the ruling powers, but lived out God's kingdom and God's rules. He treated each one of them as something precious. He did not value them by Status they hadn't achieved; Wealth they hadn't accumulated or Power they'd never attained. He just loved them no matter what: widows and orphans, friends with no bread to serve, a guy in a ditch; Pharisees and followers, beloved and betrayer – he just loved them all. And it got him killed. The kind of kingdom that Jesus was proclaiming was not about the powers of this world, but about the merciful love of a gracious God. So he forgave us, and loved us, too, until the end.

You know, I have spent most of my preaching career “undoing bad theology.” Bad popular theology has done so much damage to our theological foundations that we might imagine the God that Luke describes as a God who just can't wait to throw sinners into the fiery furnace. As a result, people choose to see only ‘that one time’ that Jesus got angry, and turned over the tables in the Temple. But Jesus was filled with righteous indignation that was modelled by his life and his actions as they are expressed throughout all four of the Gospel accounts. We just don't like to meet this Jesus, so we wait until he calms down and a nicer story comes along.

But these difficult sections of the Bible should test us and our theology. If we do our reading, research and our prayerful reflection well, this questioning of our assumptions about God should lead us to talk about how we -- as individuals and churches -- answer questions like: *Who*

*exactly was Jesus? What was his message? How did he participate in society, and how worried should we be about the effects of this fire that Jesus wants to kindle among us?*

The fire Jesus speaks of is the Holy Spirit that was poured out on the disciples on the day of Pentecost. It is a creative spirit that begins by insisting that the truth must be told. Luther Seminary Professor Matt Skinner says, *"Fire is, after all, about refining. And refining hurts, especially for those of us who have a lot of impurities sticking to us. Because we mistake those impurities for purity, and because we lie to ourselves that self-protection is a form of justice, and we resist Jesus. Therefore (Jesus) also speaks of the division his message brings..."*

This week I have spent a good amount of time talking - with the Church Council, the folks in Wednesdays at One, the staff and individuals - about the recent action of the Churchwide Assembly in Milwaukee. There, the almost 1000 voting members from across this church declared our denomination a Sanctuary body. While some saw the use of the politically-charged word "Sanctuary" as concerning - an open door to all sorts of actions that could result - others saw the declaration as an inspiration - to open doors to all sorts of actions that could result. What some saw as liberating, others saw as concerning. The difficulty of life together became apparent, and the house became divided.

But the truth is, Advent's response to the Sanctuary declaration was decided long ago, and is decided again and again, every time we answer the doorbell and assist someone in need. It is decided whenever we pack health kits, or backpacks, or teach our children how to serve. It is decided each time we take a mission trip or financially support ELCA World Hunger, Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Services, Lutheran Disaster Relief, Heart to Heart, Children Intl or MLM - or peacefully advocate for change - wherever our individual and communal passions and God direct. Those decisions are not made by mandate, but by the people of God listening to what God is whispering in each ear, every moment, every hour of every day in each community across the church. And how we do our ministry is always being reformed, reshaped, to the needs of the world outside our doors.

The Lutheran church first came to America with an immigrant clergyman in 1640. In its first 250 years, it grew predominantly through the influx of immigrants from northern Europe, those who were yearning for a better life for themselves and their communities. Today, Jesus reveals some of his intense yearnings as well - his desire for the well-being of the world God loves. We all have issues that stir us to action - and I have heard you ask for the church to speak out on issues that are dear to you. Regularly, teaching materials called Social Statements are developed to help us interpret our own response as individuals and communities. Abortion, Gun Violence, Slavery, Sexuality, End of Life, Civil Engagement, Justice for Women. Some you receive with gratitude; some you might not. But we always stand on the authority and witness of Scripture as the foundation when we step out in faith. I commend these resources to speak to your issues. *(Available at [elca.org](http://elca.org).)*

Now, I understand that this church that was born out of conflict (they call us Protestants, you know) has **division** in our DNA. Our western culture demands that we see the world as either/or and that each issue should be resolved for one side or the other. That is partisanship, not discernment. So, how do we test our own faith as we participate in the political scene **as** Christians? Here's what Jesus said, *"Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your mind and with all your strength, and your neighbor as yourself."* There is no comma - as if - we commit to love if you are loveable, or if we understand you, or if you become like us or if you meet our standards or if you deserve it. It's GRACE.period. Not GRACE, comma. God said Grace to us, and Grace, by definition, is undeserved mercy.

Church. The body of Christ, shifts and changes with God's call to love. When someone is in need – of food, or shelter, or acceptance for who they are, God's calling is for us to give ourselves away. That requires a change on our part. Sometimes just a raised awareness. Sometimes a change of heart. But sometimes we have to let go of something even if we're too old to change, or don't think the change is warranted or we don't agree. We let go of something of ourselves just because it's the right thing to do. And that fire of sacrifice burns us...but it is also what binds us together. It's not about our agreement – it's about God – it's about our mission – it's about God's claim on us in baptism, and the power of the Holy Spirit that we received, so that we are strong enough to consider someone else before we consider ourselves. Christian politics? It's marked by our care for the world God loves - because "while we were still sinners, Christ died for us." So, it's Grace. Period. in the kingdom of God. And that is where all of us are called to live. AMEN.

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#### Resources:

**(Here's a sidebar)** The U.S. Constitution says that the government may "*make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof,*" with the intention to keep the government out of religion. It was never intended to keep the church – that would be you and other people of faith - out of governmental processes. The phrase, *Separation of Church and State*, came from Thomas Jefferson in 1802 and is not in the Constitution itself.

Reorus Torkillus, the first Lutheran clergyman in North America, arrived in New Sweden on April 17, 1640. The roots of organized Lutheranism in North America extend back to the formation of the Pennsylvania Ministerium, the first Lutheran synod in North America, founded in 1742 by Henry Muhlenberg. [Wikipedia.org](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pennsylvania_Ministerium)

Matt Skinner, commentary on Luke 12:49-56 in [Working Preacher.org](http://WorkingPreacher.org).

Presiding Bishop Eaton reminds us who we are: We are **church**. We are **Lutheran**. We are church **together**. We are church **for the sake of the world**. And we do not belong to an organization that tells us how to believe nor how to act on those beliefs. We are still called into the world as witnesses to the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and obviously that takes the community's interpretation.