

Proper 15 Year C 2019

As you might expect every semester of the three years of seminary we were required to take a course in Liturgy. In the junior and middle years most of our study had to do with the tradition and theology of liturgy... where it comes from.... How it has changed over the centuries... The theology upon which it is grounded. But in the senior year of seminary most of our liturgical course work had to do with how to do what we do... we learned the names of all the stuff we use in church... and how to lead a service; from Baptism to burial and everything in-between. Each senior student was assigned a "liturgy week," in which that senior had to design and lead all the services for one week: The daily office, and sung Morning Prayer; a contemporary communion service, and then a full blown festal Eucharist. One was charged with planning the music, and the readings, and the prayers of the people... and assigning one's classmates to fill the roles required for each service. It was a little daunting to say the least with seminary professors looking over your shoulder.

My week went along nicely. Everybody assigned to serve showed up; the services flowed without a hitch... and finally we came to the Thursday Eucharist. Everyone was vested, preacher, acolytes, celebrant, the choir... the pulpit bible was marked... the vessels were on the credence table. And the procession began...

and after about three rows down the aisle, my liturgy professor's voice shouted stop! "There is no God without fire", he boomed! We had forgotten to light the candles on the altar... No God without fire... those words have stuck with me for now some fifteen years.

In our gospel reading today Jesus announces to his disciples that his ministry is about bringing fire to the earth; that his ministry isn't at all about comfort, but it is about confrontation... so much so that it will cause division... division even among members of families. So let's revisit the principal themes in Luke's gospel. First, as we talked about last week, Luke proposes that the way of Jesus calls for a revolutionary change in society... a radical reordering of the socio-economic system... a change in which the poor are raised up and the rich cast down... He's calling for a sharing of wealth, and a classless society... including the inclusion of outcasts. The same liturgy professor who halted our Eucharistic procession also told us that if we never got accused of being a socialist, we probably weren't preaching the gospel. The second prominent theme is the idea of prayer as a predisposition for ministry; that is, we are to practice mindfulness; we are to pay attention with heightened awareness and imagination, keeping the will of God, that is, the greater good, at the heart of our consciousness; and then third, that the baptized faithful, that is, the church, is an evolving living and

breathing organism. You remember that Luke traces Jesus' genealogy all the way back to Adam, the first man... so the church began at the beginning of time. It spans the sweep of history and empires. It is connected to what came before, and it continues to blossom forth, given new circumstances, new challenges in a new place and time, but the truth endures from generation to generation. Luke takes great pains to connect Jesus with the prophets come before. In other words the church is greater than history, and it endures. In fact the voice of the church orders history, connects the past, present, and future. Luke is also the writer of Acts, which is an account of the growth of the church after Jesus' death and resurrection... and this growth is connected to the ancient tradition. Christianity for Luke is not a new religion, but the continuation of the Law and the Prophets, the venerable tradition of Judaism, which is, at its heart, to be a light to all nations and people.

For Luke Jesus is a snapshot of what the church looks like in his day and time, during the time of Roman occupation, the time of Caesar Augustus and his successors, in the region managed by Herod Antipas, and the Prefect Pilate overseeing Jerusalem. Jesus' ministry is the church's ministry in short... and according to Luke that is a ministry of fire. A ministry of fire because the times require the people of God to live into their passion; that they are to confront with

the truth the powers and principalities of a broken world. This is another one of those gospel readings where the preacher often decides to preach on the Old Testament lesson, or on the epistle reading... “let us run with perseverance the race set before us” that sound nice... but this gospel reading is not so nice. It’s got some attitude; it doesn’t sound like the Jesus we’ve all come to know and Love. This Jesus says for all who would listen, that he comes to bring division, not unity! That he’s come to set father against son, and mother against daughter... I mean, is this just a case where Jesus hasn’t taken his medication?

Some of you know about the Jesus seminar. It is a group of biblical scholars who have spent lots of time trying to discern what things Jesus actually said and what things that the gospel writers put in his mouth.... So as a result of their scholarship, they produced color coded gospels... one color represents sayings that Jesus most likely didn’t say, and there are other colors that track with increased probability. Words that are red are words, based on this rigorous research, that Jesus probably did say... and this passage in Luke is coded red... red like fire. So what do we make of this fiery Jesus, who comes to cause division: This Jesus, all the preconceptions notwithstanding, who probably said these very words: “I come to bring fire to the earth... Do not think I come to bring peace to the earth. No I tell you, but rather division.

In our culture right now, in public life, in the media, and in our institutions, the church included, there's this talk in the air that goes something like this: We are so divided; can't we all just listen to each other; everyone's opinion is valid; can't we all be open minded and just get along? But I think it is this kind of talk that Jesus is warning us against... because brothers and sisters we belong to the truth; and the truth is not up for compromise... some in the culture would say that we all have an opinion as to the truth... but Jesus says no... truth is not a matter of opinion... We know the truth; When you see a thunderhead rising in the west, he says, you know it is going to rain; when it's August in Mobile, you know it's going to be hot. We all have the capacity for truth... anything else is willful ignorance.

So, we know, for example, that it is wrong and criminal to round up our undocumented Latino brothers and sisters, and separate them from their children, while at the same time looking the other way from holding their employers accountable that hire them; we know it is wrong for weapons of war, automatic and semi-automatic guns, to be sold to the public. The mass killings in this country are due to the ready availability of assault weapons. That's not an opinion. That is the truth. Prisons are filled disproportionately with people of color. That is the new institutional racism in our country that has more incarcerated people than the next three ranked countries combined. That is not

an opinion. That is the truth. People go bankrupt in this the wealthiest country in the world because of excessive medical costs, because of being uninsured or under insured. That's the truth. Lying in a position of public trust is unacceptable... right? That's not an opinion. That is the truth.

The bottom line for us dear people of God is that truth matters more than unity. In other words, the church's mission is not unity. The church's mission is the truth... and if that causes division then so be it. If that means we lose members, then so be it. Jesus calls us to be advocates and activists for God's Love for the world... and Love will always challenge the status quo. Love will always challenge the powers that be, because the powerful will always serve power first at the expense of the weak. And God is on the side of the weak, because God wants all God's people to live in the light of well-being and dignity. When all people participate in God's gracious abundance then all people are well and whole. Until the marginalized are welcomed at God's table then we all are the poorer for it. That is not an opinion. That is the truth.

Leslie Newbegin, Anglican bishop of Southern India wrote these words sixty years ago:

“Once again it has to be said that there can be no going back to the ‘Constantinian’ era. It will only be by movements that begin with the local congregation in which the reality of the new creation is present, known and experienced, and from which men and women will go into every sector of public life to claim it for Christ, to unmask the illusions which have remained hidden and to expose all areas of public

life to the illumination of the gospel. But that will only happen as and when local congregations renounce introverted concern for their own life, and recognize they exist for the sake of those who are not members, as sign, instrument, and foretaste of God's redeeming grace for the whole life of society."

So brother and sisters, stand fast in the truth. Do not compromise what you know to be good and true. Have courage in the face of willful ignorance. Trust the truth of the legacy handed to us. And know that unity is God's problem, not the church's. The times we live in require that we opt out of comfortable Jesus, and that we claim the one who brings fire.