

August 11, 2019
Rev. Jane Florence
“Sweet Baby Jesus”
Luke 12: 49-56



I held my first grandchild last week. A few minutes after she was born, I saw Evelyn Jane open her eyes my heart exploded in love. Every time I see her, I peer into the universe and Creator God in those new born eyes that were knit together in her mother's womb. Back at the office, planning worship and holding Evie in my heart, I thought that's the image we get at Christmas: a lovely, precious new born, silent night, peace on earth, good will to all, Immanuel, God with us, a tiny and expansive celebration of God's love.

I know it's August and not December, but we could use some sweet little baby Jesus right now. A choral ensemble of angels singing Peace on Earth to light our night sky, would be really nice considering last weeks' news headlines. We need the sweet little baby Jesus of Handel's Messiah that proclaims "unto us a child is given, Wonderful, Counselor, the Prince of Peace." We need the sweet baby Jesus that grows into a gentle and compassionate Good Shepherd. We like the image of Jesus that feeds and comforts. We like Jesus who looks for lost sheep, scoops one up and tenderly carries it back into the fold draped across his shoulders. We are lost sheep ourselves sometimes. We are comfortable when Jesus comforts the weary, finds the lost, feeds the hungry, and welcomes the outcast. We can be all those things. It's good to come tougher to hear those stories of Jesus- tenderly taking little children upon his lap - reaching out to the ostracized- calming the storm when the disciples are frightened on the sea. How soothing it is to hear Jesus say, "come into me and I will give you rest." We need the Jesus full of rest and hope for we are weary as assault weapons ring out across our country, and families are torn apart, and thoughts and prayers go out to malls, schools, churches, streets and homes. Let's have some sweet little baby Jesus usher in peace.

The problem is we come today and hear this shocking passage of Luke where grown up Jesus sounds more like John the Baptist than the gentle Good Shepherd. Jesus in this passage evokes images of sword and fire, conflict and turmoil. Just like those prophets of the Old Testament warning of God's impending wrath if the people don't take a good hard look at their nation's actions and decide to do differently. Frankly, I don't like our verses for today. They came from the lectionary - which is a list of standard readings for Sunday worship shared across denominations. This is why I don't like the lectionary; it confronts us with uncomfortable texts. This is why there is a lectionary - to confront us with the uncomfortable and move us to wrestle with the difficult passages that we would rather sidestep than face.

Jesus announced Good News in the fourth chapter of Luke in his inaugural sermon. Since then, the story has shown him offering healing touch to lepers and paralytics. We have seen him answering questions about religious ritual. He has given the sermon on the plain in Luke telling people the way to live to connect with God and others: love everyone including your enemies, judge no one including your enemies, forgive as a way to find new life; pray,

ask and seek God and you will know God; don't let worry consume your life! These are hard lessons; now he speaks of fire! division! households in conflict, father against son, mother against daughter, children against parents. What happened to sweet baby Jesus asleep on the hay no crying he made?

This fire-bringing, family-dividing Jesus makes demands on us that are uncomfortable. Jesus calls us to live a way that is different than the dominate culture. It causes us to be different and to face division because we choose to live these hard truths Jesus offers as a way to know the Holy.

God knows we already have more than enough division on the earth. We do not need any more. We are divided socially, racially, economically, politically, religiously. There is division in marriages and families, in the workplace, in our schools and in our churches. One thing we can say is Jesus names his truth. He is what psychologist call a well self-differentiated being. He knows his identity is in God, and he has a strong sense of "personal autonomy." He possessed a sense of who he was and what he wanted to accomplish in life..¹ His deeply rooted sense of identity and purpose allowed him to stay true to himself, even when he was misunderstood by his own family, deserted by his friends, and ridiculed by the religious establishment. Jesus speaks about family and friend division from personal experience.

Marks Gospel recounted that his relatives "went out to restrain him, for people were saying, "He has gone out of his mind" (Mark 3:21). John's gospel related that many of his disciples "turned back and no longer went about with him" (John 6:66)

Not everyone responds positively to bringing good news to the poor, outcast and marginalized. Good news that brings change threatens those already doing well and those in power who like the way things are. Jesus brought a message of empowerment and encouragement to those who were oppressed, but what comforts the afflicted also agitates the comfortable. Jesus is not bringing down fire of judgment and destruction as some escathological doomsday preacher. He is announcing a lament. Lamenting of behalf of mothers and fathers, sons and daughters, and people as whole. Lamenting the division caused by those who will truly follow his teaching and recognizing his commitment to it at all cost as God's vision for all God's people

Jesus speaks of his baptism to his mission and the stress he is under until it is completed and the division that his mission brings. His mission which can tear apart families and ultimately create a new baptismal family of all who would commit to his way. Those who have dared to follow his teachings experienced the fire and division that Jesus tells about.

"When suffragists were trying to get the vote for American women around 1917, a small group of women regularly stood in front of the White House with signs protesting. They simply stood there, day after day, but their presence aroused enormous rage. They were heckled and attacked. Many were arrested and sentenced to long periods in prison. Alice Paul, one of the key leaders, went on a hunger strike. She was forcibly fed, out of fear that

¹ WilkieAku and Noreen Cannon Au. The Discerning Heart: Exploring the Christian Path.

her resistance was creating too much support. The world did not want to hear judgment on its sexism. Martin Luther King Jr and other civil rights activists led peaceful demonstrations in Birmingham, AL in 1963 to protest Jim Crow laws. Unarmed marchers were attacked with firehoses, dogs and clubs. The world did not want to hear judgement on racism.”²

Our country today does not want to hear judgment on our propensity for violence. Some in our country do not want to hear judgment against lobbyist or assault weapons. Some do not want to hear the consequence of our crimes against the earth’s wellbeing. Some do not want to address the lingering plague of racism in this country or the privilege that continues to feed off it. Some want to speak only of sweet little baby Jesus and personal salvation while ignoring the truth in his teaching which requires both personal and national righteousness. Living out the compassion of God’s love in our life and in our world is a challenge. Jesus experienced it. His followers are promised that we too will experience the challenge.

The challenge in our personal life is to speak kindly to others, to not engage in gossip, to resist the urge to get revenge or play the victim, to share what we have with those who have less, to forgive and not judge others. If we take Jesus seriously, it is a challenge every day to live according to his teachings. It is a challenge in our public life as well to give up some of our privilege so that others can have a voice; to vote not in only in our own self-interest but in the interest of others the whole community; to live our baptismal vows and resist evil, injustice and oppression in a non-violent way.

Jesus speaks in this passage of the division that comes when his followers follow hard teachings. That’s why we need each other to check in at the end of the week, at the mid-point of the week. To ask, how’s it going? How’s your time with God going? Where are you experiencing God’s presence? Where have you enacted God’s grace? Where are you struggling with your faith? Those are the questions our faith friends, sabbath sisters, Companions in Christ can share with us to help us on our spiritual paths.

Those are why we need community committed to grow in our own acts of mercy and compassion, committed to create a space for all people to walk with us and work with us, so that we may look into the eyes of all God’s people and see the universe and Creator God who knit us all together in God’s womb of love.

² Lynn Japinga. Feasting on the Gospels.