

Sermon – Proper 15 – Cathedral of the Incarnation
August 14, 2016

The Dean's little rendition of "Don't worry be happy" last week pretty much sums up Jesus words of encouragement to his followers to date? The section of Luke's account that we heard these last few weeks has centered on Jesus reassurance that people should not worry nor be afraid about their life. The Father he says, knows that we need all these daily things. "Do not be afraid" he says, "for it is the Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom" (12v32). Now if I had of been one of the followers trying intently to listen to Jesus whilst being trampled by the others I might also have felt happy that (i) I had nothing to worry about in my life anymore, and (ii) I was going to be given the kingdom. "Don't worry, be happy" indeed.

The followers of Jesus though had started to become complacent. They would not have had a care in the world If they took Jesus at his word. Indeed, Jesus also told them to sell all of their possession and give alms (v33). It is here that Jesus starts to assert that complacency is not what he intended for them. He reminds them that earthly possessions can get in the way of truly following God and these goods can distract them from being prepared for the coming of the Master. The gift of the kingdom does not come free and requires of us a readiness to live as an example for others. When we know what God desires of us and in us, let us not delay giving ourselves into that service and devotion.

After Jesus conveys this "Don't worry be happy" sentiment, the narrative turns a little darker. The plot thickens you might say. The weight of what Jesus says next seems to get heavier and the tone more serious. It is as though Jesus needs to grab his followers by their cloaks and stare deeply into each of their eyes to explain his God given mission. His words seem to convey those heartfelt emotions of someone who realizes they have a vital calling but getting started, getting the ball rolling so to speak, is downright hard work.

Nobody seems to be getting it! "Why do I have to take all this time to explain it to you," he might say through gritted teeth. "I just wish that you got it." "I wish I could use less energy trying to convince you with all these parables that I have to create, so that you might understand just a little of the weight of my task". He's under stress he exclaims, and will remain so until his task is completed. When I read that I felt like getting down on my knees and apologizing to God that it took me so long before I got it.

We as a people always seem to take years before we realize that what has been going on in the midst of our society should really be changed. I can imagine the early emancipation and civil rights campaigners feeling exactly as Jesus did as society, and especially institutions like the Episcopal Church, took years to finally come around to recognize that slavery and racism was wrong. Our complacency about the plight of the oppressed can further oppress them.

Jesus has a few words for his complacent followers, and also for us this morning. Jesus did not come into the world to "bring peace to earth" he says, "but rather division" (v51). An audible

gasp might be heard from the crowd? What, division. What about all this peace and love that Jesus has been talking about.

Jesus comes with such a powerful mission and message that it will divide families, “three against two, and two against three” he says. “Father against son and daughter against mother.” Those that heard the message and chose to follow Jesus, might be shunned by their families. The family unit was after all the bedrock of their religious and temporal life, as it is today. Here Jesus was saying that he was going to break the family up. We understand this to mean that following Jesus was divisive. I always wondered what Zebedee thought of James and John just dropping their fishing nets and leaving him to follow Jesus. He couldn’t have been happy. Two of his trusted sons had just abandoned him. It wasn’t a slow transition either, it happened immediately.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German priest martyred during WWII, explains a person’s call this way: “Through the call of Jesus we become individuals ... every person is called separately, and must follow alone neither father nor mother, neither wife nor child, neither nationality nor tradition, can protect a person at the moment of their call. It is Christ’s will that they should be thus isolated, and that they should fix their eyes solely on him.”¹ In this sense division in families and between friends is the inevitable result of a call of God. You might have experienced this, or you might be experiencing this now in your life.

In the creation of division, in this turning away, there is also a turning toward. When we are called by God and decide to accept the mission of our calling as Jesus Christ intended, we experience the loneliness of this decision in the moments before we find welcome in the body of Christ. When we turn away from living for ourselves, when we turn away from aiding and abetting injustice, when we turn to follow Jesus, we are turning toward those that we have turned from.

We turn toward our family, toward those that feel rejected, those that feel spurned, with open hearts and with the love of God for us, we love them. With our lives repurposed we give example to Jesus’ call to the world. Bonhoeffer reminds us too that “Christ stands between us, and we can only get in touch with our neighbors through him ...intercession is the most promising way to reach our neighbors, and corporate prayer, offered in the name of Jesus, the purest form of fellowship.”² Pray becomes the catalyst in our turning toward.

In the last section of the gospel reading today Jesus reminds his disciples that their perceptions and intuitions about the everyday occurrences in the world are true. When they see “a cloud rising in the west” they can say with some certainty that it is going to rain. On Thursday morning when I woke the sky was a brilliant pink and I recited in my head “a pink sky in the morning is a shepherds warning.” Low and behold it rained in the afternoon.

¹ Bonhoeffer, D *The Cost of Discipleship* Touchstone, 1959 p95

² Ibid p98

Jesus asks us that if we understand the way the climate works then why are we so slow to understand the present age. It's our complacency again. We see signs around us all the time. Now more than at any time in history we can be exposed to the injustice of poverty, the tragedy of terrorist attacks, the plight of the lonely and the scapegoating of refugees. Yet we can cast it off by busying ourselves with our lives and we sort of become immune to the tragic events in the world. Jesus would say that we are failing to interpret the present time.

I feel this year our political discourse is full of twitter feeds that speak to division, speak to a lack of truthfulness, speak to marginalizing and scapegoating groups that are perceived to have caused problems, and speak to the manipulation of authority to mask actions or inactions. These simple and divisive slogans bely the complex social issues that are at play in our world.

But is this division that I feel, and I feel it more strongly this year than in other years, the same division that Jesus spoke of? Are our political leaders coming with fire and a baptism to make this country a better place? Well the language is certainly fiery, and maybe we are experiencing division, but are our leaders willing to go to their deaths to bring justice and healing to the world. Jesus was!

The big human rights movements of the past have many similarities to the Jesus movement that we are all a part of. Whilst none of them contained the baptismal sacrifice Jesus taught and that we participate in, many of their leaders did pay the ultimate price of death for their cause. Jesus baptism calls for us to die to our old self and to be born to a new life, powered and enhanced by the Holy Spirit.

In the prayer that follows baptism we thank God that we are raised to a new life of grace. We pray for an enquiring and discerning heart, we pray for courage to will and to persevere, a spirit to know to love God, and we pray for the gift of joy and wonder as we gaze on the works of God. We are then marked as Christ's own forever.

Our baptism calls us to turn always toward those divided from us and from the world. Our marking as Christ's own gives us the heart to bridge the division, to overcome injustices, to act out of love and to keep at it until our deaths. A kingdom divided against itself will fail Jesus reminds us, but a kingdom united will only grow stronger.

In the next 90 days we will be bombarded with all sorts of rhetoric, slogans, tweets and misinformation from all sides of the political world. As much as we might distrust one group over another we are called as Christians to listen for talk, and to look for actions, of the turning toward.

The action and intention of turning toward the other with a heart of grace and goodwill takes courage but it is courage that we gain through baptism and have renewed each day in our prayers and whenever we gather for this sacred meal together.

So have courage in the midst of the division of our world, be blessed to know God, be strengthened by the Holy Spirit to turn toward your family and neighbors and may God bless you and this country of ours.