

Sermon, Proper 15C

Luke 12:49-56 & Hebrews 12:1-7,11-14

Preached Sunday, August 19, 2007 at St. Philip's, Brevard by RDF

Should the rescue workers in Utah continue their efforts immediately or wait until their safety can be assured? Did NASA make a wise decision to forego a space walk to repair the Space Shuttle before its return to earth? Is the problem with climate change so severe that we all have to make immediate, significant changes in the way we live? Or do we wait until there's unanimity among scientists and our national leaders? Should our troops begin to come home from Iraq right now, or should they stay there a year or more?

There is no way around it. Momentous decisions demand that someone make a choice as to how they or we will respond. As in the case of these current events, there will be serious consequences depending upon which decision is made. And there are sizable groups of people who see it one way as opposed to those who would make a different choice. There are risks with each option and there are risks if a decision is delayed.

Jesus is saying something similar in these stark and challenging words: "Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth?" he asks. "No, I tell you, but rather division! From now on five in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three ... father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother" (12:51-53).

That doesn't sound much like "family values" does it? But it does sound like Jesus, who makes it clear that we must choose from among costly alternatives: Is he the Messiah — or not? Will we follow him — or not? Will we strive to model our lives after his — or not? And if we think we've already made these decisions, will we choose to re-affirm them today as well as tomorrow? The consequences of our decisions can and do create divisions, even within families.

At his birth, people predicted that Jesus would have this effect. The wise Jew named Simeon told Mary that her son was "destined for the falling and rising of many..., and to be a sign that will be opposed..." (Luke 2:34). Once, when Jesus was grown and in the midst of his ministry, some people came and said to him, "Your mother and your brothers are standing outside, wanting to see you." But he said to them, "My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it" (Luke 8:20-21). And three Sundays from now, we will also hear him say, "Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters ... cannot be my disciple" (14:26). Is there some exaggeration and hyperbole in these words? Probably. But that doesn't deny the fundamental truth of what Jesus is trying to convey. It doesn't let us off the hook. We still must choose.

Years ago a king, King Frederick William IV of Prussia, once visited a local school. He went to a classroom and spoke to the students. Holding up a stone he asked the children: to what kingdom does this belong? They responded, "mineral." He then pointed to a flower and asked: to what kingdom does this belong? They answered, "plant." He then pointed to a bird flying by outside the window and asked: to what kingdom does that belong? They replied, "animal." "Very good," he said. Then he asked: now, to what kingdom do I belong?*

St. Augustine said there are only two kingdoms that matter: the kingdom of God and the kingdom of man. By virtue of our birth, we all are citizens of the second, the kingdom of humanity. But to be a citizen in the kingdom of God, we have to make a choice. We must, if you will, apply for citizenship in that kingdom. We must commit ourselves to be loyal to the One who created it and to live by the teachings of the One who rules it.

Most of us are not accustomed to being presented with such mutually-exclusive decisions. We value options and choices. In our democratic and consumeristic culture, we cherish the freedom to choose from among many attractive alternatives. Part of what we value is that we can make such decisions on our own timetable, when it is most convenient. Meanwhile, Madison Avenue encourages us to think of these choices as an essential part of our personal identity: that we are what we buy, and that our personality is a reflection of the unique lifestyle we create for ourselves.

Do you think I'm disguising my skepticism about all this very well? I didn't think so. Jesus is telling us that being his disciple doesn't look or feel like these consumeristic lifestyle choices. Choosing to follow Jesus as Lord is momentous and life-changing. It's a commitment that is filled with risk. It is certainly not convenient, and the consequences are not always comfortable. But for these very reasons, it is also life-giving and soul-shaping. Think back, for a moment, to the founding of our nation. Think of the choices that shaped the future course of our country. Fifty-six people signed the Declaration of Independence. Their decision resulted in untold sufferings for themselves and their families. Of the 56, five were captured by the British and tortured before they died. Twelve had their homes ransacked and burned. Two lost their sons in the Revolutionary Army. Another had two sons captured. Nine of the fifty-six fought and died from wounds or hardships of the war. Even with all of this, just think of the difference they made! Their risky and costly choice changed the world forever.

Decisions of this sort sometimes cause division within the Church. Just think of some of the momentous choices we have faced over the years in the Body of Christ. Should the uncircumcised be baptized? Should white and black people worship together in God's church? Should women be allowed to preach, celebrate the sacraments, and be church leaders? Do we have a special obligation as Christians to serve the needs of the poor and marginalized? Is war something a follower of Jesus can ever sanction? Is divorce and re-marriage something the Church can ever allow? As you know the list goes on up to the present day — struggling as we are with yet another church-dividing issue. Unfortunately, it doesn't seem to matter that our divisions are among people who all believe in God and agree that Jesus is Lord.

So, what do we do when we face such divisive decisions? One thing we can do is try to learn from the past. During World War II, Adolf Hitler commanded all religious groups in Germany to unite so that he could control them. Among the Christians known as the Brethren assemblies, half complied with Hitler and half refused. Those who went along with the order had a much easier time. Those who did not faced harsh persecution from the Nazis. In almost every family of those who resisted, someone died in a concentration camp.

When the war was over, feelings of bitterness ran deep between the groups and there was much tension among the Brethren. Finally they decided that the situation had to be addressed. Leaders from each group met at a retreat. For several days, each person spent time in prayer, examining his own heart in the light of Christ's commands. Then they came back together. As they confessed their hostility and bitterness, the Holy Spirit moved among them. Slowly, in fits and starts, a spirit of unity began to bring them back together. And in the following years, the healing and reunion they experienced became a powerful witness to the love of God in Christ. They did not allow such a terrible disagreement to permanently divide them.**

Sometimes, being a follower of Jesus means that we must choose to love those with whom we strongly disagree. Jesus said we must love our enemies. In light of that commandment, how do you think he'd want us to treat members of our own Christian fellowship? I believe that God is giving us a tremendous opportunity right now to witness to this kind of reconciling love — in the Episcopal Church and the Anglican Communion, no matter what our convictions might be on the issues of the day. Is this difficult? Of course. Is it risky? Yes. Do we sometimes wish we belonged to a denomination with no divisions regarding these issues? I certainly do.

But, my friends, we have a different calling: to choose again and again to follow the one who said, "Love one another as I have loved you" (John 15:12). And we accomplish this, — slowly, over time — by choosing to re-commit ourselves to Christ and his ways again and again, every day. If this sounds difficult to you, then you might want to hear once again these words from the Letter to the Hebrews, which I offer in closing:

"Since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.... Consider him who endured such hostility ... from sinners, so that you may not grow weary or lose heart" (Heb. 12:1-3).

AMEN.

*Source: unknown (quoted from Bible.Org). ***Our Daily Bread*, October 4, 1992.