

August 19, 2007

The Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 15)

Since the beginning of July, the Gospel readings from St. Luke have been focused on what it means to follow Jesus. The various stories (the sending out of the disciples, Mary and Martha, the Good Samaritan, the insistent friend) illustrate what we are to do as followers of Jesus: to love God with all our heart and all our mind and all our soul AND to love our neighbors as we love ourselves. This is the great commandment and I'm sure each of us knows it by heart.

In today's Gospel we hear Jesus say: "I came to bring fire to the earth and how I wish it were already kindled!" These words are eschatological...talking about the end of the world as we know it. They are meant to provoke a variety of images: fire that devours, or fire that purifies, or fire that sheds light on the darkness, or fire that provides warmth. We also hear Jesus say today, "Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division!" Again, these words can conjure up various images: turmoil, schism, reordering of systems, challenges to the status quo.

But what IS the message of today's Gospel and how is it related to those from earlier this summer? Today's Gospel is a continuation of the teaching on what it means to be a disciple of Jesus; on what happens as the kingdom of God breaks into human history. While this reading might seem to be an abrupt change in tone from the rather friendlier stories of earlier weeks, it does continue to explain what happens as individuals make a choice to follow Jesus, to be his disciple...to reorder their lives in response to the abundant, unearned love of God. When we choose to follow Jesus, to live according to the Great Commandment, a fire is ignited. The

fire can consume us, purify us, give light to those dark corners of our existence. When we choose to follow Jesus, we take a stand for certain values and this can cause turmoil within our family or at our place of work. Choosing to love others rather than demonizing them can be a challenge to the status quo. Choosing to follow Jesus as the **ongoing** revelation of God's love can be viewed by some as schismatic.

In today's reading from the letter to the Hebrews, we hear an exhortation to the early Christian community to put aside anything that would prevent them from persevering as **disciples** of Jesus. There will be trials to be endured and disciplines to be undergone. But, they are urged to look to Jesus as the pioneer, the model of what it means to live a life in faithful response to God's all-encompassing love. They are also urged to see Jesus as the perfecter of faith. We can get a sense of what this means from a collect in the Book of Common Prayer: "Almighty God, whose most dear Son went not up to joy but first he suffered pain, and entered not into glory before he was crucified." So we hear again that following Jesus won't be easy, but we firmly believe that perseverance as disciples of Jesus will bring about the Kingdom of God here on earth.

And the psalm today gives us a further glimpse into what happens when God's Kingdom breaks into human history: the weak and the orphaned are saved, the humble and the needy are defended, the helpless and the poor are rescued, **all** are delivered from the power of the wicked. But God doesn't bring this about on his own, from afar, like some wizard or magician. No. God invites each one of us, with our own unique gifts and talents, to respond to God's love for us by sharing it with others. We experience God's love. We come to know that we are loved and thus we are enabled to love others. It's the Great Commandment all over again.

Let me put all of this into a more contemporary setting. Michael Moore's current movie, "Sicko," is about the health care system in the US and in other countries. Now, I know to some of you, Mr. Moor is the devil incarnate, but trust me, there is at least one socially redeeming value in the movie. Near the very end of the movie, a line is spoken, almost a throw away line, an after thought, but I found it to be very insightful. The line is something like, "It is not about me. It is about WE." The search for a common good is about looking out for the welfare of all of us, even if that means that I personally have to undergo some inconveniences or hassles along the way.

It is not about me, but about we. This phrase has a double meaning for me this morning. On the one hand, I think it sums up well the concept of discipleship. Following Jesus is not about what I do or how I do it, but rather it is about our working together as disciples of Jesus to bring about the kingdom of God. Discipleship is done in community, and for us that community defines itself most significantly in the communal acts of Baptism (dying to the old self to rise as a new creation, a disciple) and of Communion (bread broken and given, wine poured out and shared by all).

The other potential meaning for this phrase today centers on this being my last Sunday at St. Paul's. This coming Friday I leave for a year of seminary training in Berkeley, California. While a visitor might think we are celebrating my personal call to ministry through my presence in this pulpit, a sending forth to happen later this morning and a reception in the Queen's courtyard after this service, in reality we are celebrating this community's exuberance and perseverance as it lives out its life of discipleship. Let's explore this a bit further.

Today's celebration is not about me, but about we. As disciples of Jesus, we are called to move outside our own needs, to tend to the needs of our neighbors...especially the poor, the sick, the widowed, the outsider, the rich, the haughty, the powerful. It's not about me, it's about we. St. Paul has taught us boldly that while we are many parts, we are all one body, working together in our **diversity** to bring the Kingdom into being. Each part is different but no one part is of greater value than the other. Each of us is an invaluable part of the whole. It is not about me, it's about we.

Some of us are healers of bodies, others are healers of souls. Some of us feed the hungry like our children did by buying goats for struggling families in the developing world. Some of us reach out to the children in Tijuana whose parents are in jail, some of us give our time and talents to those children in our midst in programs like Godly Play or the summer Sunday school. Some of us make music, some of us sweep floors, some of us pray, some of us make visitors feel welcome. If you are anything like me, though, we just go about our daily lives, not consciously acting as a disciple, not making a show of our piety or religion. But in reality, as we live out our faith, our values, we do show forth to others the divine love within us. Regardless of the role we see ourselves playing in the everyday world, as a disciple of Jesus we know and act out the reality that we is more important than me.

On a personal note, John and I are so thankful to have found this community. Who would have thought that we would find a community that did not just "accept" us, but embraced us, encouraged us, invited us into the deepest ponderings of what it means to be a Christian in today's world. Who could have guessed that beyond the great music, the lively preaching, and the beautiful liturgies that we were looking for, we would also find a faith community that was willing to ask the hard

questions and be open to considering all sides of an issue without animosity? Who would have thought four years ago that I would now be standing in this pulpit, on my way to seminary and ordination to the priesthood?

But let me remind you again, this celebration is not about me, it's about we. Together our hearts listen and respond to the stirrings of the Spirit. Together we face the trials and disciplines of community life. Together we study and play and pray. As disciples of Jesus we are breaking new ground, fanning the flames of renewal, challenging the status quo...not just in supporting a gay, partnered man's pursuit of priestly ordination, but in **all** those ways in which we truly are the cathedral for the city.....loving God and loving others as we love ourselves.