

Rio Rancho Presbyterian

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## THE EYE OF THE STORM

Luke 12: 49-56

Once I had dinner with a bright young Christian college student named Lindsey. She had just returned from a semester abroad in Jordan, which also took her to Turkey, Lebanon and Israel. I truly wish every college student could study abroad. It is often a transformative experience.

And so it was for Lindsey. She had stayed with a Christian family in Jordan, a deeply devoted couple with two children. For them a commitment to Jesus Christ meant something truly counter-cultural. This family lived in a Muslim majority nation next door to a Jewish majority nation in Israel. As Christians, they felt keenly their minority status, in truth, their vulnerability in the midst of terrorist threats.

Lindsey told me this was the first time she realized just how controversial Jesus really is. Not just two thousand years ago, but every day in Jordan she saw the risk of being a Christian. She

discovered that only in the privacy of their home or in the fellowship of their church was it possible to speak openly about Jesus. In truth, there are many places in the world still where discussing Jesus entails a certain risk.

The reality is this. In his own day Jesus WAS very controversial. This rabbi from Nazareth faced constant conflict, opposition and misunderstandings. That was the burden of his life. In our reading from Luke, Jesus acknowledges the reality he faced day by day. He announced that he had come to cast fire upon the earth. And so his deeds and his words brought division. His mere presence sparked a firestorm wherever he went.

Thus, Jesus lived in the eye of the storm. He did not bring peace and tranquility nor did he soothe the status quo. He brought discord within families and households, bitter divisions between family members. In truth, that conflict invaded Jesus' own family. Initially his family thought he was out of his mind and tried to stop him.

Incidentally, my own father considered me a "minister in the synagogue of Satan". That's because I left the fundamentalist church of my youth and became a Presbyterian. He felt that way

until the day he died. So I understand this passage in a deeply personal way.

In the Apocryphal Gospel of Thomas Jesus announces, “Whoever is near to me is near to the fire.” Indeed, many did not get him and many opposed him. The Gospel of John describes his life poignantly: “He came into his own and his own received him not.” Not only did his family think he was crazy, but his closest followers deeply misunderstood him.

The religious leaders accused him of all manner of evil, including blasphemy and demon possession. And the political leaders saw him as a threat and eventually conspired to do away with him. Jesus was certainly “a man of sorrows, acquainted with grief.” Rejection by his own people led to his baptism of death upon the cross.

It occurs to me that Jesus will forever be controversial, even among his followers. Christians are in the same position as Americans and the British—two countries separated by a common language. So many Christians use the name of Jesus, but he means very different things to his various followers. And so the church remains deeply divided world-wide.

But Jesus stands among us, his splintered Christian followers, and still asks, “Who do you say that I am?” Sadly, our answers differ widely. And yet Jesus yearns for his Body to be healed of its many divisions. He offers us his Spirit of peace, yet we struggle to find unity. Jesus is controversial among us even yet.

Jesus is controversial among the world religions, especially the Abrahamic faith traditions. Still a stone of stumbling that divides us. Jesus stands between us and our Jewish brothers and sisters. He stands between us and our Muslim sisters and brothers. This is a family quarrel between the many children of Abraham and Sarah. Jesus remains an imposing presence and he still asks the same question of all the children of Abraham, “Who do you say that I am?”

Jesus is controversial still among the political rulers of our times. Whether Jesus is pushed out of some cultures or is used to bolster some cultures, he remains elusive. He cannot be excluded and he cannot be co-opted. He is still Lord of all nations and subject to none.

And Jesus still confronts the powerful of this world with a challenge. He will always be the Prince of Peace who stands over against our warring madness. He will always be the Lord of the conscience demanding justice and fairness. He will always stand

beside the least of these our sisters and brothers so often marginalized. To every ruler who asks cynically, “What is truth?” Jesus answers, “I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life.” He cannot be silenced or coerced.

My hope is that Jesus will always be controversial. As the old adage says, “Christ has come to comfort the afflicted and to afflict the comfortable.” We can never domesticate him or make him a mere calming bromide. Why? Because Jesus never lets us off the hook. He never allows us to settle for anything less than our best. He unsettles us. He generates discontent within our spirits. Discontent with the brokenness of the church. Discontent with the nations of this world. In truth, when the spirit of Jesus grabs us, then we understand these words, “May the Peace of Christ disturb you immensely.”

My fondest hope is that the spirit of Jesus always remain controversial to us. He contends with us when we throw up hands in surrender. He wants to light a fire within our hearts that burns within us. He wants to give us a laser focus on what needs to change in our own lives and in the world around us. Jesus persistently urges us to care more, give more, love more, extend ourselves more.

This is an uncomfortable Jesus, even an inconvenient Jesus. “I come to bring fire to the earth.” Discontent and discomfort. “I have come to bring division.” Not an easy peace, sitting on our hands. But rather, a “fire in the belly” to motivate us with a renewed passion for justice and reconciliation and redemption. “Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth.” Not peace, but a fire burning in our hearts. “Whoever is near to me is near the fire.”

OK. So let’s take a breath. Please know that this is a sermon I need to preach to myself periodically. If it happens to strike a chord within you, then God bless. Maybe what I need to say to myself and perhaps what you need to say to yourself is this: “Jesus is relentlessly pursuing us, that Hound of Heaven we cannot escape. And our hearts are restless until they find rest in our Lord. So may his peace light a fire in your heart. And I pray his peace lights a fire in mine. Thanks be to God. Amen.”