

Warning and Reassurance
A Sermon on Luke 12:49-56 by the Rev. Philip Major
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In our Gospel passage, there is a message of warning and a message of reassurance. To hear this message more clearly let's consider the passage in its context in the Gospel of Luke. It's helpful to remember that Luke never intended for his Gospel to be read in ten or twenty verse portions. This Gospel is intended to be read, or heard, as one might read a book, perhaps not in a single day, but certainly not spread out over the course of an entire year.

It might be helpful to think about the Gospel of Luke being arranged in four large sections. The first portion is especially memorable. The first section is chapters one, two, and three where we have the story of the birth of Jesus. One of the main ideas in these three chapters is the theme of reversal, the reversal of our expectations. Two thousand years ago everyone expected important words to be spoken by men. In the Gospel of Luke, Mary and Elizabeth are the first people to proclaim the word of God. Mary's song in chapter one is filled with images of the reversal of our expectations: God has scattered the proud in the imaginations of their hearts. God has cast down the mighty from their thrones and has lifted up the humble and the weak. Throughout the Gospel, traditional expectations are overthrown; this theme is especially prominent in the first three chapters.

In the second portion of Luke, chapters four through nine, Luke's second theme takes center stage; God's salvation is intended for all people, the poor and the rich, women and men, regardless of race or nationality. God's offer of salvation to all people builds on the overturning of our expectations in the first three chapters.

The third portion of Luke is the longest and it builds on the first two themes. It begins at the end of chapter nine and continues through chapter nineteen. In the first portion of Luke, the primary theme is the overturning of our expectations. In the second portion, the primary theme is God's offer of salvation to all people. In the third section the main idea is that even though God offers salvation to all people, many people reject God's offer. Furthermore, our expectations are overturned once again as many of the people we expect to be faithful in following Jesus fail to follow Jesus' call to us to love one another as God has loved us.

A few weeks ago, we saw all three of these themes coming together in the story of the Good Samaritan, a story that only appears in the Gospel of Luke. In the story, the despised foreigner helps the person in need, while the priest and the learned, holy man show their greed and lack of compassion by refusing to help.

In recent weeks we have heard other stories of people failing to respond to God's gift of salvation. In chapters nine and ten we heard stories about people who say they want to follow Jesus, but they all have excuses about why they can't begin the journey right now. Last week we heard the parable of the rich farmer. The rich farmer responds to the gift of the enormous harvest with greed and makes plans to build enormous barns to hold his harvest.

God's salvation is offered freely to all, but many people turn away from God's way of salvation and love. Our expectations are overthrown again and again. People who are supposedly devoting their lives to religious practices or to trying to follow the rules are the people who are often rejecting God's offer of salvation. This is the context for our passage from chapter twelve.

Jesus said, *I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what stress I am under until it is completed! Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division!*

There are several important ideas here. The first is that we have to make a decision about whether we are going to follow Jesus or not. Jesus offers us the way of love and we have to decide whether we will follow that way or not. We cannot follow Jesus' way of love and do things that hurt other people.

Sometimes people get the impression that following Jesus means we won't have to engage in situations of conflict. This is not correct. There is going to be conflict. Following Jesus means engaging in the conflicts of our lives with the intention to care for people who are most vulnerable. It means engaging in these conflicts in ways that show compassion for other people.

The third idea is that God is actively engaged in the conflicts we experience. We sometimes look around us and see all of the problems and conflict in the world and think this means God is not engaged in our lives. Jesus says it works the opposite way: God is engaged with us in the conflict, in the problems, in the overwhelming challenges we experience.

So, in this first portion of our passage, we hear some warnings and we receive reassurance. Jesus goes deeper in the second half of the passage. Jesus said to the crowds, *When you see a cloud rising in the west, you immediately say, 'It is going to rain'; and so it happens. And when you see the south wind blowing, you say, 'There will*

be scorching heat'; and it happens. You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present time?

Jesus' words point to three important ideas for us. The first is that God is concerned with what is happening in the present time. All through the previous chapters of the Gospel various people have failed to respond to Jesus' message. Most of the time they have failed to respond because they have focused their attention on the past or the future.

Following Jesus requires us to focus on the present time. God wants us to love one another. This is not a past or future kind of thing. Loving other people only happens in the present tense. If we are following Jesus we will be focused on sharing God's love with other people today and tomorrow.

The second idea is that people are not paying attention to the most important thing, which is to take care of the other people around them. People are often distracted. People like to be distracted. We need to pay attention to what gets our attention in life.

The third idea gets at the heart of why Jesus is not all meek and mild in this passage. In the first eleven chapters of the Gospel of Luke Jesus has shown particular concern for those who are powerless. Jesus has made strong statements about the burden of those who are rich and powerful to care for the poor. Jesus has been incensed by the blindness of religious people and legal experts who claim to be following the rules but who fail to follow God's way because they are giving all of their attention to unimportant details.

The third idea behind Jesus' angry words is that there is an outrageous sort of neglect that is displayed by the rich and powerful. *You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present time?* These people should know better; they are showing willful neglect of what God cares about most, which is the people.

We see several examples of this outrageous sort of neglect in America. We see this outrageous sort of neglect exhibited by people who claim to be motivated by their religious faith and by people who have been given the privilege of an enormous amount of wealth, education, and power. The example of outrageous neglect of the needs of the common people foremost in my mind is the decision of the United States Supreme Court to strike down a New York law that placed strict requirements on those who would carry guns in public places.

On June 23rd, the Supreme Court voted 6-3 to strike down a gun law that was passed by our representatives and senators and has been in place for one hundred eleven years. Up until now, New York has been one of the safest states in the United States, in terms of gun violence. The rate of gun deaths is five times higher in Wyoming, Louisiana, and Mississippi than it is in New York. The Supreme Court eliminated one of the most effective gun restrictions in the United States one month after an eighteen-year-old man in Texas walked across a school parking lot, legally carrying an AR-15 rifle that he had purchased according to the laws of Texas, and entered the school and killed nineteen young children and two teachers.

Jesus has the harshest words for those who are in positions of power, and for those who claim to be following him, yet show no concern for God's people. 49,000 Americans died as a result of gun violence last year. When I found the number I checked it twice, because the last time I said anything about gun deaths in America during a sermon, just a few years ago the number was much lower. But yes, thanks to the decisions of the United States Supreme Court the rights of those who want to carry and use guns are now much greater than the rights of little children to grow up.

Are we proud of this? The six Supreme Court justices who overturned the gun laws of the State of New York, all claim to be Christians, and all appear to be proud of their decision to overturn our common-sense gun restrictions. By their actions, it appears that six justices on the Supreme Court seem to have no concern for the fact that guns are now the leading cause of death for children in America. What civilized nation would allow this to happen? Like the Pharisees and the legal experts who fail to follow Jesus in the Gospel of Luke, these six justices of the Supreme Court are powerful and highly educated. Like the Pharisees, they claim to be motivated by their religious faith. These six Supreme Court justices claim to be following Jesus. I think Jesus would have more than a few strong words for them.

Sometimes the only reasonable response to the willful neglect of God's people is to be furious. This is the context for Jesus' strong words in the Gospel of Luke.

So we are warned and we are reassured. We are warned to pay attention to what God cares about, which is the well-being of God's people. We are reassured because Jesus says, "Yes, my friends, there is going to be a fight. I will be next to you as you struggle to protect and care for my people."