

This Time

Wayne Waibel – 08/14/2022

Today's gospel lesson exposes a side to Jesus that can be exceedingly difficult to illuminate. Up to now, we have been experiencing the Son of Man as one who personifies peace and love. These eight hard verses remind us that Jesus came into the world not to unite, but to divide.

His purpose was to start a fire on earth. In fact His only lament was that it had not as yet been kindled. Our limited imagination keeps us from understanding that at the opportune time and under the impulse of God – when division begins, the gospel has begun to break in among us.

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Our Epistle this morning retraces historical leaps of faith. It reminds us of what and who constitute the basis of much doctrinal integrity within the Christian faith. Placed in the context of the early Jewish Christian community, the letter to the Hebrews tries to address the waning faith and seemingly insurmountable challenges to those who are struggling mightily with the status quo.

They are in dire need of a reminder and testament to a faith that supersedes worldly comfort and success. This little band of Christians is growing tired of the ridicule, hostility, and shame. The letter to the Hebrews was written to stiffen their spines and strengthen their resolve.

The Christian imperative at play during the time of Christ hasn't really changed that much over the centuries. We are still bound by the Master's exhortations to Love God and our neighbor. While we remain undeterred in our desire to emulate Jesus, we understand our failure to fully empower Him to direct our path.

It must have been very confusing for the multitude to hear Jesus speak of His pitting them one against another by intent. And then to be reminded of how God moved to obliterate entire nations in order to fulfill His promise to His chosen people - only to remove them from the Promised Land when they turned away from Him.

Circumstances crush us, and we have no explanation. I dare say life has not gotten any easier or clearer. The messiness of the world continues to confound and disappoint.

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The curse of the twenty first century is entirely too much information. Other clergy talk of their current condition and remember fondly when there were more people in the pews, and those people knew that Moses lived before Jesus.

We are living in a world driven by the bottom line, social media, and prosperity gospel. It is harder and harder to find righteousness and wonder. And the real tragedy of this time is the loss of imagination. Perhaps that is what Jesus is addressing when He talks about setting fire to the world and pitting father against son, and mother against daughter.

There needs to be a renewal of sorts, and that rebirth will come in the form of expanded imagination. Not the kind that produces *Star Wars* and *Harry Potter*. The kind that illuminates the human spirit and promotes free thinking that is unbridled by rhetoric and politics and skewed worldviews based on faceless and baseless hyperbole.

I don't believe Jesus was referring to a consuming fire in His statement. I believe He was referring to a cleansing fire. One that results in a beauty – a singleness of purpose – a new reality. Maybe that is the driving force behind His eagerness. A new world – the kingdom come.

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The metaphor of the vineyard in Isaiah illuminates his prophecy during the Syro-Ephraimite war in 734 BCE, which foretells the coming judgment. This judgment comes as a result of a moral breakdown – certainly, but a lack of compassion as well.

The prevailing authorities have once again dismissed and sequestered the poor and the marginalized. As they and we are reminded continually this type of action does not find favor with God. Isaiah even goes to the length of explicitly telling the truth to power – “For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah are His pleasant plant.”

The good news found in Hebrews is not the call to martyrdom, but to endurance. And as a people – we are very familiar with that concept. We revere it in our sports heroes, and marvel in it when it comes to the resilience of our children and contemporaries alike. There is much to admire in this world. Simply peel away the illusions and pretend achievements, and wonder abounds.

Last week, there was a children’s program at the library. A juggler, and nothing brings out little kids like a juggler, was performing. Because of the rain, we had to move the event inside, so there was a press of parents and children heading for our large meeting room in the lower level. That’s a lot of humanity all headed in the same direction at once, and there was only one stairway and one elevator.

I just happened to be at the lower level watching folks come down when I noticed a tiny little toddler appearing to size up the situation from the landing between flights of stairs. Kids don't typically fly down the stairs like you and I can, so the trail of event goers moves kind of slow.

This little tyke saw the opportunity to try something imaginative, so when the lower stairway cleared, she turned around, got to her knees, and simply slid down the stairs on her belly – softly landed at the bottom – popped up to her feet and waited for mom (holding a baby) to catch up.

Beyond this little slice of total wonder, what truly amazed me was that among all these people, I was the only one who even noticed. I looked around, but did not find anyone to react with. When I turned back to this little kid, our eyes met, and it may not have been intentional, but she winked at me.

For me, this drives home the point that when we follow the path of staying focused on Jesus Christ our Savior, we are able to see the joy in life despite the suffering.

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The book of Luke is probably the easiest to decipher when it comes to the life of Christ. It is both poignant and revolutionary. Whatever translation you prefer – most of it makes sense.

That is also why it can be a tough read. There's no mistaking some of its more startling passages, and this morning's reading exposes for us a heavy dose of the stark reality Jesus declares.

While scripture enlightens us and provides realistic faith for our future because of what God has done in the past, it also serves to remind us that there may be things that for our own good God does not and will not control. That's just the way it is.

Our lives are so wide and varied – it's at once remarkable and totally natural that we get along on every level. Because of that – perhaps in spite of that – when I try to make sense of why Jesus is so anxious to set fire to the world, a possible answer appears in the letter to the Hebrews.

Jesus is able to look past the baptism with which He is about to be baptized and endure the cross because He fully anticipates the joy that is to come. Faith allows us to see beyond what is right in front of us.

Left to our own devices – we will undoubtedly fall short of the kingdom of God, but Christ has overcome the world, and our failures and our follies. All we have to do is love the Lord our God with all our heart, and all our soul, and all our mind, and all our strength; and love our neighbor.

We do this, and we'll be fine – come hell or high water... or fire ... or... terror... or... even the mid-term elections. Amen.