

Pastor Kris Litman-Koon
Date: 14 Aug 2022
Today's Word/Phrase: discernment
Lesson: Luke 12:49-56

[Jesus said,] ⁴⁹“I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! ⁵⁰I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what stress I am under until it is completed! ⁵¹Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division! ⁵²From now on five in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three; ⁵³they will be divided: father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law.”

⁵⁴He also 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. ⁵⁵And when you see the south wind blowing, you say, ‘There will be scorching heat’; and it happens. ⁵⁶You hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present time?”

This past week I was in Columbus, Ohio for the ELCA Churchwide Assembly. Pastor Ginger informed me some of you had requested that I take the time today to talk about that experience. I am more than happy to do that today, because doing so allows me to avoid that gospel lesson we just read. In all seriousness, though, in my opinion difficult texts like this one need to be unpacked a bit. Plus, today's gospel relates to the work that we do as a congregation and as the ELCA.

When we look at this passage where Jesus says he came to bring division to the earth and not peace, we must be aware that such a passage can be used – and has been used – to justify all types of bad things. This passage has been used to justify literal wars, schisms of the church, and cruel repudiations of people from Christian fellowship. Yet, this passage comes from Luke's gospel, which famously begins with angels singing about Jesus' arrival bringing peace on earth. So how can we faithfully read today's passage, and yet not misapply it?

The key to doing that is found not long after the angels sang of peace. The infant Jesus was presented to Simeon at the temple where Simeon, filled by the Holy Spirit, declares to Mary that her newborn is destined “to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too.” Biblical scholars argue that this piercing that Simeon foretells does not refer to Mary’s pain of witnessing her own son’s death. Rather, this piercing is the struggle that Mary will undergo in trying to respond to Jesus’ ministry. In Luke chapter 8, Jesus is dismissive of his brothers and his mother Mary – who are within hearing distance – when he redefines family as “those who hear the word of God and do it.” Even the hallowed definition of what constitutes a “family” is rearranged in light of God’s larger covenantal priorities, and that comes at a cost. What Simeon had been foretelling was that the inclusiveness of Jesus’ ministry would rattle the values of the status quo. This reign of God that Jesus proclaims will divide people’s motives and it will require spiritual discernment to determine how to be faithful to God’s calling.

It is that division we feel in our hearts when we encounter a beggar and something within us asks, “Is this person worthy of shelter, food, and my mercy?” It is the social division that occurs when people we love or trust tell us to fear or hate another person, but we look at that person and instead the Holy Spirit says, “This beloved child bears the image of God.” Certainly Luke’s original readers, who lived at a time when Christians were persecuted and oppressed by Rome, would recognize that there is a cost to following Jesus. You see, there is Pax Romana – “the peace of Rome” – which declares that peace occurs when you keep your mouth shut and you submit to the powers that be. On the other hand is the peace of Christ, which declares that peace occurs when you value other people like God values them and when you seek justice for the least of these in this world.

It is a daily struggle to discern whether it is the peace from Jesus or the peace from the empire that we are ultimately aligning ourselves to. So there is division within ourselves as we discern. And there can be division within our relationships, and that can hurt so much. I know, because I’ve lost a deep friendship over it. Perhaps you have as well. The path of peace that Jesus offers is rarely easy to follow. That is because Jesus’ path of peace asks us to do the difficult work of

hearing people's cries and working through our differences to best address it, even when loved ones tell us to instead follow the status quo.

I saw a lot of that discernment this past week at the triennial ELCA Churchwide Assembly. I was elected last year to be a voting member sent from the South Carolina Synod. I am honored to have served in such a capacity. There are some things you should know up front about Churchwide Assembly. First, this assembly has the highest legislative authority in the ELCA. Second, by constitution, no more than 40% of the voting body at Churchwide Assembly can be pastors or deacons. That means that lay people – like yourself – make up 60% of the people. So this assembly isn't "the higher ups" nor some kind of bureaucracy; it is composed mostly by people like you. Third, the Churchwide Assembly can only make decisions that direct the national expression of the church. There are also the synodical expressions and the congregational expressions of the church, and all that the Churchwide Assembly can do with those is encourage them to take specific courses of action. That is something very unique about the ELCA polity. Even though we have bishops and a church-wide expression that spans the country, the power in the ELCA is mostly bottom-up.

There are a few decisions made by this year's assembly that I want to share with you. The first one is called the Land-Back Resolution. This resolution passed with 737 people voting YES, and 65 people voting NO. This resolution directs the churchwide offices to do a variety of actions that will strengthen its Native American ministries. Yet, on the synodical and local level, this resolution encourages two courses of action. First, it asks synods and congregations to regularly acknowledge who the original inhabitants were or are of the land we now possess. There were two tribes that originally occupied the land where All Saints is located; does anyone know their names? Sewee is the first tribe. They were known for using the marshes along the coast as a trading corridor. By the early 18th Century, however, they were forced into slavery, and those who remained free likely made their way further north and joined the Catawba tribes. The other tribe that occupied this land is the Natchez-Kusso. This tribe still operates in Dorchester and Colleton counties, and they have around 400 members. The state officially recognized them as a tribe in 2008, and they are still striving to receive federal recognition. The second thing that the Land-Back Resolution asks congregations and synods to consider pertains to when a congregation is permanently closing. It

asks that if it is feasible, to consider giving the land back to the original tribe, or that the proceeds of the sale of the land be given to the ELCA's Native American Ministries. But please note, the resolution does not direct any congregation or synod to take this course of action; the Churchwide Assembly can't do that. All that the resolution can do is ask the synods and the congregations to consider this course of action as a viable option for how a congregation can die in a faithful way.

Another resolution that passed and reflects the ELCA polity was about Greenhouse Gas Reduction. This resolution wasn't brought forward until after my flight back to South Carolina took off, but it passed with 672 votes YES, and 45 votes NO. The resolution directs the national office to advocate that the United States government reaches its stated goals in reducing greenhouse gas emissions in this country. The resolution also directs the ELCA national office to reduce its own emissions. Finally, it encourages – there's that word again – congregations to discuss and implement ways to reduce their own emissions and to support a just transition to clean energy use.

I have to share one not-so-obvious reason why I am glad the assembly passed this resolution. When young people have been polled in recent years about what concerns them, climate change is nearly always at the top of the list. Conversely, I've heard some adults scoff at the climate predictions, saying for example, "2080 is so far in the future!" It is easy to write off these concerns when the math tells us we are not going to be around for that date. I mean, in 2080, I will turn 100, so God only knows if I'll still be around for these predictions. But Stella and Virginia... by 2080 they will not have even reached retirement age. So when young people today notice that the church has nothing to say about climate change – or worse yet, that the people of the church downplay it or mock it – I personally do not blame those young people when they decide to walk away from the church, because what the church has shown them is that it does not care about the world they will inherit. However, when the church makes a stand, saying that we want future generations to have a healthy earth, and we commit ourselves to seeing a better future unfold, that sends a message to the young people that we actually care.

One of the most exciting things to happen at the Churchwide Assembly was the election of a new Vice President. The Vice President must be a lay member of the church, and the main thing they do is chair the meetings of the Church Council. Let me clarify that term; between the triennial

Churchwide Assembly there is a Church Council of roughly 60 people – most of whom are lay members – and this Church Council makes decisions for the ELCA, though the Council’s decisions do not bear as much weight as the Assembly. What All Saints – and every congregation – has is properly called “Congregation Council.” There are also synod councils. The election of the ELCA Vice President uses a long process called ecclesiastical ballot. Any lay person’s name who is an ELCA member can be on that first ballot... including yours. Long story short, the process worked out over seven ballots to finally elect a man named Imran Siddiqui. He most recently served as the Vice President of the Southeastern Synod, which covers Georgia, Tennessee, Alabama, and Mississippi. Imran was not raised Lutheran; he was actually raised in the Muslim religion. Although, as he put it, “my family wasn’t very active in that faith; we were like Christmas and Easter Muslims.” When Imran went to college he became an atheist, and he was one for about ten years. But then he began to sense God moving in his life, and he became a Christian. I’m sure that the ELCA will have an article about him in an upcoming issue of *The Living Lutheran Magazine*, so keep an eye out for that. I just want to share that I was very impressed by Imran. He recognizes that the role of the ELCA Vice President is demanding, yet he wisely said that he will prioritize his young family when it comes to finding balance in it all. His previous role in the Southeastern Synod and with his day job in the U.S. Department of Labor shows that he is capable of leading meetings and of working a group of people toward finding consensus. I hope you will have the opportunity to meet him sometime.

That is all I’m going to share about the Churchwide Assembly at this time. The attendees from South Carolina are writing reflections that further expound on the various aspects of the 2022 Churchwide Assembly. I plan to share those with you later this week through our Friday e-news and I’ll have some printed copies available here next Sunday. I hope that what you hear is that your church, the ELCA, is striving to be faithful to the calling that Christ has for us: to see the image of God in all people, and to embody Christ’s compassion and love in the work we do together. It will not always be easy, and rarely there will be full agreement, but we are brought together by the Holy Spirit to discern what our next steps will be on this path of peace that Jesus gives us.

Thanks be to God. Amen.