

Sermon 8 17 & 18 19

If there was ever an occasion to preach a Fire & Brimstone sermon, this is it! OMG! You know, the last few times that I was called upon to preach on the 10th Sunday after Pentecost, Year C, I looked at the readings on The Lectionary Page (on the internet) and I decided to run away from them as fast as I could.

One time I got tricky and preached on Mary, the mother of our Lord. We celebrated her last Thursday. That was safe. It's close... That's fair... It was justified... I could have moved her to today. But I just couldn't do that again.

No.

Jesus cries out in our gospel "You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present time?"

Why indeed.

Well, let's consider the present time. How would you interpret the present time? Look all around us. What's going on in the world today? The anger - the hate - and it all comes down to fear.

I belong to a group of local priests who get together once a week to discuss our upcoming readings and we admitted to each other that this is daunting stuff. This is scary! Do we want to preach on this? Do our people want to hear about this gospel? "Do you think I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather

division!” And then Jesus goes on to talk about households divided! Do our beloved people want to hear about that?

Maybe not, but maybe it’s not about what we *want* to hear or talk about, but what we *need* to hear and talk about. I confess to you all that I believe sometimes the Holy Spirit just plunks us down right where we need to be.

And, in the same way, I believe that sometimes the Bible gives us just the readings we need to hear when we need to hear them. So rather than deflect, I’m going to embrace these readings. Because, at the very least, that’s - my - job.

Today we have a gospel that tells us —

“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! From now on five in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three; they will be divided:”

He could be speaking of us - our society - our country - fighting with each other, even people of the same *family*, people who are supposed to be loving to each other fighting with each other. Sound familiar? Kinda hard to ignore. I’ve just returned from a joyful, delightful family reunion. We came from the East, and the Midwest, and we gathered in Oregon. And we had a great time. But I know

there was a specific group of them who didn't attend because they can no longer bear, can no longer stand, to be in the same room with relatives who don't hold the same political beliefs they do. They must be with, associate with only those who believe as they do, who vote as they do.

That is apparently more important to them than being with people they love, or claim to love. All because of politics! I'm sorry, I have to say it, God forsaken politics!

"From now on five in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three; they will be divided."

Have you seen that happening? Is that who we are? Is that who we want to be? Is that the level of hate we have achieved? To borrow from Walt Kelly, the cartoonist who wrote "Pogo" - "We have met the enemy and they are us." We don't need any other enemies. We're apparently doing fine on our own. "From now on five in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three; they will be divided." Is that who we want to be? I am genuinely asking this question.

Our Old Testament reading and our Psalm speak of the vine that God planted in the land of Canaan, and how it grew wild and ugly and far away from God's intent. Can we see our land in that story?

But I thank God that we were given an epistle this week that shows us an alternative - another way to live - with hope. Paul writes in Hebrews of all of his ancestors who survived not by military might, not by cleverness, but by faith. FAITH! They conquered kingdoms, administered justice, quenched raging fires, escaped the edge of the sword, won strength out of weakness, and even though they may have suffered, they received something better, and became, in and of themselves, the cloud of witnesses that surrounds us now, cheering us on to remain faithful to the goodness that is Jesus Christ.

We are called to be foolish, yes, my friends, it has come to that. We are called to be foolish, to believe in the goodness, the unconditional love that is Jesus Christ, to believe in the foolishness of faith, not to give in to the hate that surrounds us these days, not to give in to the crippling hurt of those who profess themselves to be oh, so clever, but who have chained themselves, bound themselves, crippled themselves with hate and anger.

If there was ever a time to trust in God, it is now. If there was ever a time to trust in the goodness and love of Jesus Christ, it is now. We have run to the edge of disaster, we are in such danger of embracing the evil of anger, the evil of hate. And yes, some have. Deny them. Better yet, love them. Love them into the strength, the power that is God's love.

Let us actually, really trust in God, actually live the faith we profess. Yes, we are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses who cheer us on to believe - really believe in the strength and love of God. I believe that we can, however we can - God knows I'm not a runner, but I believe we can run with perseverance the race that is set before us, never letting our eyes waiver from our focus, the only worthy focus, our steadfast and enduring focus on Jesus Christ, offering our fragile, weak faith to him so that he can take our faith and perfect our faith and give us the strength to survive these times.

Let us continually pray to God, asking him to always be with us, to constantly remind us of his gracious presence and strength. Let us start now.

“Gracious God, please walk beside us as families, friends and neighbors - yes - and even as enemies. Please remind us always of your love for us and how powerful your love is. Don't let us sink into that 'slough of despond,' that evil ugly stew of hatred and anger that binds us and cripples us, that poisons us against one another. Don't let us forget you.

Evil has been at work in the world. Guard us from it and let your strong love for us fill us and lift us and give us peace and confidence and joy in your will for us - believing that your will is at work in the world.

Help us to trust in you. Please don't let us lose our way, but keep us always on the path of your purpose for us, your purpose of love. Help us to show, to be your unconditional love in the world, for the world, for each other. AMEN."