

“Know Jesus, No Peace”

Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost

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Text: Luke 12

When I first served as a Pastor at Longview Community Church in Phoenix, the congregation had just installed a new sign – and it was the kind you could put a message on. I think now days digital is the way to go for such signs, but back in the day it was those plastic letters – Longview Church was proud of their new sign, and it was the job of their new pastor to pick sayings to put on the sign. Now to no one’s surprise, I tend to like the ones that are a play on words, puns. Something like – “The prodigal son was having a bad heir day” – not so profound theologically, but at least a smile for people from the church sign.

There was one message though, that I thought was pretty clever – a play on words and some theology to it too – I imagine many of you have seen it: “Know Jesus, Know Peace; No Jesus, No Peace” – the first know being “k-n-o-w” and the second being “n-o” – ‘if you know Jesus then you will know peace; if you have no Jesus in your life then you have no peace’. Now maybe you like that or not – it is of course a bit corny, and too dismissive of other faiths; but I thought, you know, PEACE is an important message in Scripture that Jesus spoke of – PEACE is a good message. But, I wonder – what if someone would have read my clever church sign message, and then read the words of Jesus we heard today in Luke 12? – if you summarized Luke 12 on a church sign, then the message would read like the sermon title in the bulletin: “Know Jesus, NO Peace” – if you know Jesus, then you have no peace – turns my original church sign message upside down.

So what do we make of that? Perhaps, at least first of all, to run into this passage is a good caution against clever attempts to summarize the gospel on church signs! But if I were to give a bit of a defense of my original church sign message, there is plenty in Scripture that expresses the idea that Jesus does come to

bring peace – ‘Peace’ is the greeting of the angels at Jesus’ birth and it is the greeting of the Risen Lord to his followers: ‘Peace’ – peace with God and with one another - you could say such a message of Peace is the majority opinion in Scripture. But Scripture is not meant to be read simply from a majority opinion perspective – when we encounter something different in this story from Luke, it doesn’t take away all those other affirmations of peace, but it does give us another perspective from which to view Christ and what it means to be a follower of Christ.

What we encounter head on in this story is Jesus as an unsettling presence – the reality of the one we call the Prince of Peace as the source of disarray – the One who brings fire, division, conflict. It’s not easy to hear, and not easy for Jesus either it seems - Jesus actually says: “what stress I am under!” – do you think many people realize that Jesus said that? – Jesus is stressed out! – there is no peace for Jesus, either, as he focuses on what he is about in his ministry.

It makes me wonder what it is that motivated Jesus to say this. We’re not given any particular event or question that provokes these words from Jesus. But if you look at where things stand in the life of Jesus – here’s what I wonder: I wonder if Jesus was concerned that he was becoming too popular. At this point in the narrative in Luke, the person and ministry of Jesus is gaining in visibility and popularity – and with that kind of momentum, following Jesus could be an advantageous thing to do; if you followed Jesus you could find yourself admired and empowered and envied. Some people saw Jesus as an excellent power to leverage – the right kind of peace for them and their aspirations. So I wonder if it raised the hair on Jesus’ neck to see others want to domesticate or franchise or make a forgery of the kingdom of God.

Here we have a word from Jesus that confronts those who would follow him: ‘I did not come to bring peace – but to bring fire, division, conflict’ - and when you start to think about it, really how could it be otherwise? Jesus saw a world of

people in need – in need of food and in need of forgiveness; in need of justice and in need of goodness; in need of judgment and in need of mercy – a world that needed to be torn apart and shaken up in order to be made whole. And to be about those things, to be about justice and forgiveness and judgment and mercy and wholeness: well, part of what that involves is fire and division and conflict. Because this is a world that even though it truly needs those things, often will not receive them; and this is a world where the powerful in particular would rather make their own god that keeps things as they are, rather than listen to the Living God who shakes things up.

What we find here, is a word from Jesus that confronts what we mean when we talk about peace – that implores to us that ‘Peace’ not become just another religious catch phrase to toss around. ‘Peace’ as a reconciled relationship with God, as a personal and corporate sense of wholeness and hope in Jesus Christ - that is a good thing. But so-called ‘peace’ that is just about smoothing things over and ignoring things that are difficult – that’s not real peace, that’s complacency; so-called ‘peace’ that is about keeping the powerful in charge and leaving the rest to suffer – that’s not real peace, that’s just preserving the status quo. Centuries before, the Hebrew prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel said to the religious and political powers: ‘do not say ‘Peace, peace!’ when there is no peace.’ These words of Jesus echo those prophets, rejecting a veneer of peace and speaking to the depth of shalom – a peace that encompasses all in wholeness.

Yesterday afternoon I attended a community forum hosted by the local African-American Awareness and Development Organization – an opportunity for dialogue about issues of public safety and employment and housing and health. There were many good people there – citizens and city officials – all trying to listen and speak; but what I did notice was that in general it was people with positions of power and majority that tended more to want to say that things were going OK in our community, and people with less power and in the minority that

gave voice to concern and unrest in our community. For me as a person that has many privileges of power in this culture – white and male and Christian and married, with a degree and job and home – it can be easier for me to want to say “Peace – peace” – things are OK’; but instead it is an act of faith, of courage, of obedience to Jesus Christ, to listen to the voices with less power – voices that may sound like division and fire – but that I can hear as prophetic voices that speak to the breaking in of God’s kingdom into this world.

‘Do you think I have come to bring peace to the earth? NO! – not peace but division and fire...’ Look through the gospel of Luke with this story as a guide and you realize that what Jesus says and does is a source of unsettling, dividing, fire-y goings-on. Justice is unsettling! Reconciliation across religious and ethnic and cultural and economic divisions is unsettling! Grace and forgiveness and mercy is unsettling! The Gospel is the persistent, unsettling power of God at work to transform this world and to transform the lives of those who hear God’s voice; hear the passion and urgency of Jesus’ voice: domesticating, franchising, forgery of the kingdom of God that proclaims false peace when there is no true peace, that is not the way of Christ. The true peace of Shalom is our shared destination, but let us not be too afraid of division and fire and unrest along the way – God is at work there too.

We will often hear Jesus speak of the peace he gives – thanks be to God for such peace that we receive this day and each day; but today Jesus also reminds us – declares to us! - that God calls us to follow our Lord on an unsettled path. Who are the unsettling voices, people, places that you need to listen to? What are the unsettled voices and places in your life that you need to speak, to give prophetic voice to? Today Jesus gives no complacency to those who know and love him – but a call to follow the ways that shake up our lives and this world toward God’s kingdom of shalom – for such unsettling voices, for such a Savior - thanks be to God. AMEN.