



FIRST (SCOTS) SERMONS

“When Proud Divisions End”

Scripture Lessons: Jeremiah 23:23-29; Luke 12:49-56

This sermon was preached by Dr. L. Holton Siegling, Jr. on Sunday, September 26, 2021 at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church in Charleston, South Carolina.

Luke 12:49-56

‘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: 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.’

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

Leader: This is the Word of the Lord.

People: Thanks be to God.

Let us pray...

Almighty and everlasting God, may the words of my mouth and meditations of each of our hearts be pleasing, acceptable, even joyful in your sight, for you are our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

A few weeks ago, most of our church staff commuted over to the Sunrise Presbyterian Church, on Sullivan’s Island, for a staff retreat. Not surprisingly, for some time, COVID had made having a retreat like that more than a little bit difficult. Sunrise was an ideal location, because it provided us with a great space for us to meet both inside and out. And with the backdrop of the beach on one side and the intercostal waterway on the other...well, let’s just say that there are far worse places to have a staff retreat! One of the things I had wanted to do when we got together was to have an opening devotion at the water’s edge down at the Breach Inlet; and, if you don’t know where the Breach Inlet is, it is just a few steps away from the Sunrise Church. It is that narrow waterway which flows between Sullivan’s Island and the Isle of Palms. The beauty of the area is hard to miss, and it is a fairly predictable place as well. The tides, they come and go. The once endangered brown pelicans fly overhead. There’s often someone fishing on the bridge but that which often goes unnoticed is the danger. Because, you see, underneath the water’s surface, there sometimes lurks a very dangerous current. When I was a child, there was a large sign, a small billboard, you might say, and it was located on the Sullivan’s Island side of the breach. It didn’t have much to say, but what it did say, I can still remember. In clear large letters it read: “No swimming. Minimum fine, \$500. Maximum fine, your life!” It is fascinating to really stop and think about it. That for all of the beauty, and the routine, and the expectedness of Breach Inlet, there is present, nevertheless, a radical power that can change someone’s life forever! I suspect that a lot of life is like that. I mean, we presume to know what to expect and when to expect it.

Like a tide chart, the things of life, seasons, those matters under heaven, they come and they go, and we hardly give them a second thought. If we are not careful though, life's unpredictability can go largely unnoticed. In fact, until such a time as some outgoing tide clashes with an incoming tide or vice versa, we might not have any sense at all about what's going on under the water's surface, or behind the scenes. We might not have any idea just how unforeseeably transformative life can really be. I know that, for most of us, it is difficult to imagine that someone could think that way or that someone could live that way. But it is true, some people, they are not surprised by very much. They live a kind of "been there, done that" sort of life and the true revelatory and unexpected nature of life, it is lost to them, albeit temporarily. And when that mindset begins to creep in, do you know what else happens? We get bored! And why not? If there is no majesty or transcendence or risk or power, then where is the surprise? Where is the truth? Sadly, the truth is, sometimes the same can be said of the church. Jaroslav Pelikan, a church historian, was once asked the question, "What do you think is the greatest challenge to American churches today?" And his one-word reply was, "boredom." When he responded that way, I think that, more than anything else, Pelikan had in mind a church that has grown accustomed to a rather undemanding Gospel, a Gospel that no longer surprises us. I think he had in mind a church which relates to a relatively familiar Jesus and I think Pelikan was on to something!

When we celebrated Rally Day a couple of weeks ago now, we took time to unpack the theme of fanning into flame the gift of faith that God has given to us, and while that sounds lovely, and while there really is incumbent upon us, the responsibility of stoking that fire and nurturing it so that it will burn brightly. It is still a fire with which we are working!

In C.S. Lewis', *The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe*, the young girl, Susan, is talking to Mr. Beaver who says, "Aslan is a lion, the Lion, the great Lion." "Ooh" says Susan. "I'd thought he was a man. Is he quite safe? I shall feel rather nervous about meeting a lion." "Safe?" said Mr. Beaver. "Who said anything about safe? 'Course he isn't safe. But he's good. He's the King, I tell you." It is easy to gravitate to those more pleasant places in God's word. I do it all of the time. On the occasion of Jesus' birth, for example, I love how the angel and the heavenly host praise God and say: "Glory to God in the highest heaven and on earth peace among those who he favors."

I love the story of old Simeon, sitting there in the temple. He had been told that he would not die until he had seen God's promised Messiah and upon seeing the baby Jesus, he declares: "Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation."

Those are great stories, but they are only part of God's larger story! I say that, because, on the flipside of the angel's proclamation, are the screams of the mothers whose children are killed by King Herod; and while Simeon undoubtedly expresses great joy upon beholding Jesus, he also says: "This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel." And, then, here in this morning's New Testament Lesson, Jesus, the one who elsewhere said, "Come to me all who labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest," in this morning's Gospel reading he's talking about bringing fire to the earth. Now, we recall how it was that John the Baptizer told us that Jesus would baptize us with the Holy Spirit and with fire, but this feels different! I mean, this doesn't sound like the Jesus who walked along the Sea of Galilee, and who spoke kindly to the fisherman, to James and John, and said: "Follow me"; though, perhaps if we were to ask Zebedee, the father

of James and John, the one to whom the task of mending the nets fell when James and John dropped what they were doing and immediately followed Jesus. Maybe if we were to ask Zebedee he would say that “That sounds exactly like Jesus!” Oh, for all Jesus’ talk about becoming fishers of men, all Zebedee could see were the ones that got away! Of course, I’m only speculating about Zebedee. We don’t know his inner-most thoughts. He may have wholeheartedly embraced James and John and their sense of call to follow Jesus. No. I mention their father, Zebedee, merely to point out that he may have personally and uniquely known something of this fire about which Jesus spoke.

In Luke chapter 12 verse 51, Jesus goes on to say: “Do you think that I’ve come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division!” Now, that word, “division”, it has stayed with me this week, especially considering that so much of Jesus’ life was marked by multiplication, like the time when he fed the 5000 with just a few loaves and fish. In fact, Jesus always seems to be about the business of taking our scarcity and making of it, abundance. What’s more, it seems to me, that if there was any division in Jesus’ life, it came in the form of dividing things like, our despair or our sorrows! But then I stop and think about how we reacted to Jesus. I think about how the world treated him, and I think about how it was that the closer we got to the cross the more our numbers dropped. Oh, we showed up in force for Palm Sunday! The Bible says that “all Jerusalem came out.” We even came to see the spectacle of Jesus carrying his cross until the Romans gave that task to Simon of Cyrene. Ah, but by the time we get to the foot of the cross, there are only a few of us left, namely, Jesus’ mother, his mother’s sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, Mary Magdalene and the one beloved disciple. Now, that’s division! But notice that the division that we witness is a matter of the human condition, and by that, I mean, the division, it’s on us! It seems to me that this is where that dividing line is drawn, because when Jesus talks about division, he is talking about our priorities. He’s talking about us being united with Him in ministry. What’s more, the Bible makes it clear that following Jesus is not always comfortable. Jesus presented the world with a radical shift from the status quo. Which for us, among other things, it means that our faith in the One True God is not something we put on the bedside table. We can’t slide in our desk drawer for safekeeping. On the contrary, it is a life-changing fire in our souls which can cause sparks to fly.

In this morning’s Old Testament Lesson, God, through the Prophet Jeremiah, He wants us to understand that when we are presented with an undemanding, nonthreatening God, a God whose waters are always calm. If that is what is being presented to us, then we do not have the complete picture of God, because God demands our complete allegiance and God threatens anything that gets in the way of his love for us and our love for him. Jeremiah declared, “‘Is not my word like a fire,’ says the Lord. ‘Like a hammer that breaks rocks into pieces.’” If you have ever watched a company actually lift or move a house, then you know that it is no small task. The movers, they go underneath the house and they disconnect all the pipes and the wires, all of the gas and water lines and drains, until the home is literally separated from all of its previous connections. Then they construct a way to lift the house, sometimes with large beams which are placed under the house or sometimes through the bottom of the house and they stretch from one end to another and up she goes. It’s a complicated and difficult process, to be sure, but many homeowners are willing to pay the expense and suffer the uprooting of their home. The matter of breaking it away from its previous foundation. They are willing to endure all of this because of the promise of a new location, a new and better foundation (Invitation Sunday, Kisserow).

Is this not what happens when Jesus comes into our life? He sunders those connections with our previous life, those habits and practices which get in the way of our new life of faith. He relocates our priorities and gives us an altogether new foundation and the foundation that Jesus gives, oh, by grace through faith, it endures forever. Think of it this way. Our house / this relationship with God, which is founded upon the freely given promises of Christ Jesus. This altogether foundational relationship, it determines just how good our relationships are with others, even those closest to us, even our family. For if they too have built their lives upon Christ, if the heart and mind of Jesus is also operative in their life, then the foundation of our life lived together will be, at its eternal core, as solid as a rock. Ah, but take away that kind of kindred Spirit, should we not expect divisions to occur? Should we not expect that a home built upon a foundation other than Christ will ultimately find its foundation fractured and broken? Or think of it this way, our relationships with one another are only as good as our relationship with God; ah, take away that Godly foundation. Oh, we may be living under the same roof, but we are essentially living in different homes / different realities / divided loyalties as it were! I still remember the occasion Martha Ann and I were tucking Harrison into bed and I said to him, "Harrison, do you know that I love you more than anything else in the whole wide world." He responded, "Yes," but he continued, "But I don't love you more than God. I'm supposed to love God more than you, right?" Of course, he was right!

Barbara Brown Taylor shared some heart wrenching imagery from within her sermon entitled: *Family Values*. In it, Taylor presented not a portrait of a perfect Norman Rockwell family, eating and talking together, but rather a portrait of a family consisting of slamming doors and stone silence meals. Her point was that this is what can happen when one family member puts God first and the others do not. That is what Jesus is telling us here in Luke's Gospel. That when people do not share a common foundation, a common focus. When people put other things before God, then a divided household will be inevitable. And why? Well, it's really quite simple because while God may be a great many things, God is never boring! God is not just the surface of the water. He is everything that is beneath. He is the full breadth and scope of both the safety and the danger, the miracle and the mystery. Oh, make no mistake about it, the Gospel is forever radical and demanding. It is not a flashlight, but a fire; it is not a butter knife, but a sword. It can set us free to live and to love, but it can also divide!

In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The following sermon has not been edited by the author; therefore, there may be discrepancies. When in doubt please refer to the audio version of the sermon on this website.

