

Proper 15-C St. David, Cullowhee August 18, 2019

Coming close on the heels of this morning's Gospel message from Luke, I have to admit, this is not the Jesus I'm comfortable with.

All this talk about bringing fire to the earth and that He can't wait until it's set ablaze. It's akin to what we're hearing of the drivenness and compulsion of the mass shooting suspects in Texas, Ohio, and Florida this past week. What kind of discourse is this?

Then there is the part about how households will become divided because of Him. For goodness' sake, that's exactly opposite from the kind of community you're trying to build here: right?

Can you imagine if Valori+ or I announced an adult education program that promised to teach you how to divide your families in five easy sessions? You wouldn't come.

And I have no doubt but that the number one item on the vestry's agenda at their next meeting would be to ask the question as to whether or not we've lost our ever-loving minds.

Nope, I don't like this passage one bit. Maybe it's because I can hear an echo of "church member against church member," rector against people," and "people against the minister."

And fire from heaven? Talk about "incendiary" speech!

No, I don't like this passage, but such is the luck of the supply preacher. This is our Gospel for the day. I *didn't* pick it and I *wouldn't* have picked it, but I am stuck with it.

Consequently, since you chose to be here rather than working the *New York Times* crossword puzzle over a coffee or two, you're stuck with it, too. So let's make the best of it, okay?

Let's see what Jesus is telling us about His MISSION.

Peace wasn't part of the deal. Period. Stop.

My colleague, John, was a trained interim pastor and a good one at that. Work for him was never done. As soon as he completed his assignment with one congregation and they called their new pastor, he was asked to move on to another place.

Some of these churches were pretty healthy, while others were not well at all. It didn't matter to John. In either case, though his tactics might differ, he came not to bring peace, but division and fire. Sometimes, even though he knew in his heart that this was what he was called to do, it was enough to tear him apart.

The most difficult situations for John were when the church *thought* they were in good shape. On the surface, things looked smooth, with everyone getting along with everyone . . . or so it seemed.

What he always seemed to find was that the peace that looked so good was only there because the congregation wasn't being honest with each other. "Peace at any cost" seemed to be their motto.

Never were the sticky and sometimes embarrassing denominational or congregational issues mentioned in polite company, lest someone get offended.

Controllers -- and there were always controllers -- were *tolerated* and even *elevated* to leadership or elder status

in hopes that they would see what reasonable and thoughtful people the other leaders were, and then would stop their contrary ways.

If the controllers held their ground and didn't budge, then the rest of the leadership would eventually cave.

Don't trouble the waters.

Don't stir things up.

Let's keep everyone happy.

Sort of a sad mission statement for any church!

Then there were the controllers who specialized in gatekeeping.

They were usually longtime members who joined the church before God, and they knew better than anyone who fit in and who didn't. They were usually beloved by the rest of the congregation, or perhaps they were just scared to death of them.

They took their role very seriously. Whenever someone who was deemed "unworthy" because of their age, their race, their clothes, or their sexual orientation showed up on Sunday morning, they would make certain that person learned in subtle but no uncertain terms the church down the pike would meet their needs far better than this one. They performed this "duty" so well that the visitor almost never knew that they were getting the "bum's rush."

As I said, these were the situations where Pastor John did his best work. But it wasn't easy work; not easy at all.

If you asked John, he would tell you that his job was to be a **truth-teller**, no matter what the cost. It was up to him to

point out where the congregation was being dishonest or avoiding the deeper issues of their common life.

Even if John wouldn't say that he came to bring fire (at least not out loud), he would admit he came to bring light.

While he would readily tell you that he didn't come to bring peace, he did plan to show them where the dividing lines were, but not discussed, as I said, in polite company.

Most congregations didn't like John very much. His reputation always preceded him and often the congregational leaders would balk at the diocese or synod's suggestion that they needed him as their interim.

Why not bring someone in who could help keep things on an even keel?

Why not someone who could be a placeholder until the next pastor was called?

No, churches didn't like John very much. At least they didn't like him *at first*.

But in time, if they didn't throw him out under the guise of "not having enough money to pay him" or their not having a "good fit," they sometimes came to see the wisdom of his ways. They saw that *his* way was much more the way of peace than it first seemed.

Divisions in churches or in families are never pleasant and they aren't usually pursued or encouraged. Yet, before *true peace* can be obtained, congregational members need to recognize that the divisions exist and then go about the business of seeking understanding between those who are divided.

What is often missing -- when we avoid those troublesome conversations -- is that we don't learn how to respectfully disagree with each other.

We don't learn how to sit still and make sure we understand what the other's position is.

That was how Pastor John saw his role. He would point out the hot-button issues, and then make sure people had a safe place to talk about them in a respectful way. He kept their feet to the fire until all positions were heard and understood.

While some of the divisions were more than even John could overcome, most of the time people found that they were closer together than they had ever thought possible. And despite their differences, they could find aspects of mission and ministry in the church that they could work on together.

We have all experienced examples over the years of respectful disagreement that would make the angels sing, as well as nasty, over-the-top hostility that would make a professional wrestler blush.

We have seen congregations, yoked congregations, and dioceses that have found ways to live together and work for the Kingdom together despite some rather sharp differences. We have also seen congregations and dioceses where one or often both sides dug in their heels and never gave an inch nor acknowledged that the other side had anything worthwhile to offer.

I am reminded of a folktale about a heron and an oyster. One day, an oyster was lying on the beach sunning herself. Along came a heron looking for breakfast. When the heron

dove down to the oyster and was just about ready to take a bite, the oyster closed its shell.

The heron cried, "If you don't let go there will be one dead oyster by the end of the day."

The oyster replied, "If you don't let go, there will soon be one dead heron."

Along came a fisherman who said, "Well, you're both right!" And he picked them up in their death-grip, stuck them in his bag, and went on down the beach to prepare his own breakfast.

One day I asked a rabbi friend of mine why Jews didn't believe that Jesus was the Messiah. I was comfortable asking him because he was a chaplain colleague at Sinai Hospital in Baltimore and a U.S. Army chaplain. I knew he wouldn't be offended and would handle the question with finesse.

Without going into a long explanation that the question undoubtedly required, he raised his hands as he shrugged his shoulders and asked: "Where is the peace? The Messiah is supposed to usher in peace and we didn't and still don't see evidence of that."

Hmmm, "Good answer!" I thought. How do we reconcile that expectation with the reality we face? And while we're at it, how do we reconcile it with Jesus proclaiming that He came as a fire starter, a division bringer?

Taking my cue from the rabbi, maybe another story is in order . . . But, admittedly, it's a little dated because girls are now able to join the Boy Scouts, too.

During a hike in the woods a troop of Boy Scouts came across an abandoned section of railroad track. Each boy in

turn tried walking the rails but eventually lost his balance and tumbled off.

Two boys, after considerable whispering, suddenly offered to bet that they could both walk the entire length of the track without falling off.

Challenged to make good their boast, the two boys jumped up on opposite rails, extended a hand to balance each other, and walked the entire section of track with no difficulty whatsoever. That's a start toward answering the rabbi's insistent "Show me the peace" on the Church's GPS.

Another part of the answer for me is not found in contentious church board meetings, or wars in the Middle East, or starving children all over the world, but in the potential I see in large church and community gatherings around a common cause. Maybe you've been part of such a gathering in your professional, community, or church lives. Gatherings where you've experienced a time of peace, when what divided us didn't matter as much as the work that God had given us to do.

We learned how, for a time at least, to bash our swords into plowshares, to put down our weapons of words, to hold hands together, and to walk toward those parts of our world that have known nothing but devastating war and hunger and poverty and division.

Following the lead of congregations in Texas, Kansas, Maryland, and Indiana, a Southern Baptist church in Deland, Florida will pay off over \$7.2 million in crippling medical debt impacting over 6,500 individuals and families living at or below the poverty line in five Florida counties.

Additionally, the church will also fund three foster homes for the next year.

Senior Pastor Dan Glenn of Stetson Baptist Church announced to his congregation during a July 7 service that the church of about 1,000 members raised over \$153,867 as part of its "53rd Sunday" initiative that will be split between two separate causes.

How did THAT idea ever get its "roots and wings?"

Since the church's fiscal calendar ends in June and begins in July, the church's calendar in 2018-2019 was blessed with 53 Sundays instead of the budgeted 52 Sundays, like most calendar years.

With that extra Sunday service, Glenn said that the church's council voted to approve a plan to collect offerings during its Sunday, June 30th service for the express purpose of *giving that money away*.

In early June, the congregation was told about the initiative and that the church would split its June 30th offerings

Half would go to an organization called **RIP Medical Debt** - yes, that RIP, as in "Rest In Peace" -- in order to pay off medical debt for people in poverty living in the church's home county of Volusia.

As medical debt is one of the leading causes of financial difficulties for thousands of families across the U.S., RIP Medical Debt works with organizations and donors to buy up the medical debt of impoverished families for just pennies on the dollar. And in return, the organization forgives the

person or family of their debt giving them a reprieve from the financial burden.

The other half of that money would be donated to Florida Baptist Children's Homes to support a foster care home for an entire year, with funding to pay for things like diapers, groceries, and utilities.

What happened, Pastor Glenn said, was that the church's initial goal of raising \$48,000 on behalf of both programs was vastly exceeded. While Stetson Baptist has about 1,000 members and an average Sunday attendance of about 550, Glenn said that about 350 donors gave to its "53rd Sunday" initiative.

Glenn said that at the end of the June 30 service, \$144,000 was collected in the offering. But over the course of that next week, nearly \$10,000 more was raised. a practical way that God loves them," he added.

He noted that the \$7.2-million estimate was based on the initial \$144,000 offering collected on June 30. But with the extra nearly \$10,000 donated through the course of that week, he expects the amount of medical debt to be paid off by the church to exceed \$7.2 million.

"Obviously, this calendar anomaly of a 53rd Sunday is not something that is going to be available to us for quite a while," Pastor Glenn said. "But that doesn't mean that we won't continue to seek out other opportunities to serve people in our community ... We want to do that in multiple ways and consistently. We want to continue to be a church that is about reaching outside of our walls and making a difference for people who are not necessarily coming to church every Sunday."

When we do that, we are people of peace and justice.

When we stop our bickering and begin attending to the root causes of hunger, poverty, and war, we are people of peace and justice.

When we stop looking for what divides us and instead strive toward what unites us in Christ, we are people of peace and justice.

If we are, as followers of Jesus, also to bring division and fire – let us set fire - a “controlled burn” or “back burn,” if you will -- to the underbrush of hatred, mistrust, and prejudice, and let us be people of peace and justice *in Jesus' name. Amen.*

* With thanks to Rick McCracken Bennett, Michael P. Green, and Christian Post www.christianpost.com/news/florida-church-eliminates-72m-in-medical-debt-burdening-6500-families.html