Tenth Sunday After Pentecost

Nu’uanu Congregational Church

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August 14, 2022

*“To Let God’s Judgement Heal Us”* Luke 12:49-56

Last month, actor James Caan passed away. I mention this because of a role he played over fifty years ago, the role of football player, Brian Piccolo who was a running back for the Chicago Bears.

Piccolo, from all accounts, was a decent player—not a great one, but decent, good. He was not good enough to be in the 1965 NFL or AFL draft. He got his position on the team by trying out as a free agent, and even then, he was not a starting player. He was put on the practice squad.

Football fans—Bears fans in particular—will remember him for his tenacity, which caused him to be moved him up to be the starting fullback four years later. That is quite an accomplishment—to be kept with a team for four years, and to *advance*. I do not know if that happens anymore in major league football.

Anyway, what *non*-sports fans remember Brian Piccolo for is his friendship with the best player on the team during those years, superstar tailback, Gale Sayers. Piccolo, in his position, supported Sayers on the field. Off the field they were roommates when the team was on the road—*that* is what I remember about Brian Piccolo.

Brian Piccolo was a young white man from the east coast. Gale Sayers was a young black man from the mid-west, and in 1965 America, the teams were integrated…but only on the field, not on the road. Certainly, not when it came to rooming together, but Sayers and Piccolo did. They were the only ones on the Bears team who did because Sayers was the only black player they had at that time. Piccolo and Sayers broke a color line that had held up for as long as this country had existed.

We think of these situations as being so far back in time as to be almost negligible, but the truth is that racial prejudice is very close to our lives, even now. During the past few years in this country, we have been reminded of this most acutely. It has happened in many violent and tragically high-profile tragedies, like with George Floyd. However, we also know it has also happens in the small, everyday ways in which people are unable to *see* each other’s humanity—the many small slights that we suffer…or offer…to one another, often unknowingly, even unconsciously.

This is what Jesus longs to set on fire. This is what he longs to purge and to purify. Everything that contributes to human suffering, everything that threatens human dignity—all of this will come under the serious scrutiny of his love, and it will be judged. It will be refined by the fire of his love.

Indeed, what Jesus’ words require of us is a renewed commitment to judging the world around us. But make no mistake: we are not being asked to be judgmental. Rather, we are to make judgements, to be aware, to see all of God’s beloved people—there is a difference. When we recognize and reject the world around us when it insists on doing “business as usual,” no matter how corrupt or dangerous it is to human well-being, we are acknowledging that this “business” and its expressions have given priority to other concerns—usually having to do with wealth, or power, or status.

How many years have all of us been told about the way the earth is warming? And how much progress have we made toward curbing it? What have the arguments against us been? You and I both know we have heard them, perhaps some of us have even said them.

What Jesus is telling us in this passage is that we do not have the luxury of holding back and being polite. It is time to allow God’s love—which is also God’s judgement—to touch all of our lives. It is time to be on fire!

Yes, these are hard words to hear—especially in church. We are so used to hearing other, less discordant tones to the words we use in church. We are used to the words of peace and reassurance. Indeed, last week, we listened to how the Gospel of Luke is so constantly concerned that we should “not be afraid.” Those words—that assurance—was constantly on the lips of the angels as they announced the good news of Jesus’ birth.

“Do not be afraid of what God is doing in the world,” said the angels to the shepherds. “Do not be afraid of what God is going to do in your own body,” said Gabriel to Mary. “Do not be afraid…”

Last week, those same words were on Jesus’ lips as he spoke to the disciples about the future he and they were moving toward. “Do not be afraid little flock,” said Jesus.

Because of how we are so used to hearing those words of consolation and comfort, because no one likes being afraid or feeling threatened, we are always glad to have God’s reassurance that everything is fine and there is nothing to worry about.

Of course, that is what makes the Jesus we meet in this morning’s passage, and the things he says, really quite shocking. How angry and stressed he sounds! This is not the way we are used to hearing and seeing him.

We are shocked at his expressed desire to bring *fire* to the world. It almost sounds as if he wants to burn it all down.

Instead of peace and calm confidence, we are shocked as Jesus’ words describe division and turmoil. We are especially shocked that he identifies *himself* as the source of the divisions. We are particularly shocked that the division he so deeply desires to sow is between family members—the most important relationships, the closest ones we can have.

*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.’* [53]

This is what Jesus says he is bringing into the world.

And if you think it is shocking for you and I to hear these words in 2022, try to imagine what they sounded like to the people who first heard them! It is a wonder that the crowds did not leave him in that moment, because this would have been unheard of for the people of Jesus’ time.

In those days, the family was even more of an institution than it is today. It was your identity, and position in society. Family was everything. Without family, or with a family that was unconnected to the rest of the community, you had no wealth, and little potential for social and material wellbeing or even security. Maintaining the family, having loving and respectful relationships—all of this was hugely important. And while families (even in Jesus’ time) were not always harmonious or without disagreements, it would be difficult to imagine anyone willingly *inviting* division or discord into their lives.

Actually, it would be difficult to imagine any one of us here today who would willingly or deliberately introduce strife and discord into our families.

And yet…this is precisely what is always possible when we commit ourselves to Jesus and his way of truth and honesty—this is what being a person of faith is all about. It is a commitment to display the love and respect that Jesus has shown us in all our relationships with each other.

This is the way Jesus calls us to live in the world, and not just for the sake of “shaking things up” and having conflict and division. There are people in the world who like that kind of drama. Jesus is not one of them. Rather, Jesus is pointing to what has been true all along: that there is a cost to discipleship.

What Jesus is telling us in this passage is that there are going to be rough times, contentious times, even scary times in our lives because *there is more to peace, more to life, than just “getting along.”* There are other things in life that are more important, and if Jesus sounds distressed and troubled in this passage, it is because he knows how much this asks of each and every one of us.

What Jesus acknowledges in this passage is that the relationships with have with one another—*all* of them, including the deep and intimate relationships between family members—all of our relationships must be governed by Jesus’ way of love and respect for all people. *All* of our connections with each other must offer and be received in dignity and with a real concern for justice. If we are to going to call ourselves Christians, we must allow the love of Christ to direct our actions, our alliances, and our allegiances—even when they go against some of the very things we are taught at home by the very people to whom we are the closest.

How are we to do this?

I think the most important place to start, of course, with prayer—with a time when we present our own heart and spirit to God in private, personal exchange.

We can also do things like jotting down any thoughts, questions, or inspirations on the index cards in your bulletins—we can exchange ideas, we can open ourselves to other people thoughts and the way in which God has spoken to their hearts.

Most of all, we can be open to Jesus’ desire to touch our lives with the fire of his love and his grace. We can be purified and made ready.

I would like to bring this sermon to a close by reciting an amazing poem by Mary Oliver that I stumbled upon this week. It is called, *What I Have Learned So Far*, and in it, she talks about the difference between “business as usual,” and a fire that can change and transform—it almost sounds like Jesus speaking to us:

*Meditation is old and honorable, so why should I*

*not sit, every morning of my life, on the hillside,*

*looking into the shining world? Because, properly*

*attended to, delight, as well as havoc, is suggestion.*

*Can one be passionate about the just, the*

*ideal, the sublime, and the holy, and yet commit*

*to no labor in its cause? I don’t think so.*

*All summations have a beginning, all effect has a*

*story, all kindness begins with the sown seed.*

*Thought buds toward radiance. The gospel of*

*light is the crossroads of—indolence, or action.*

*Be ignited, or be gone.*

Well, amen.