

## “Which Freedom Do We Choose?”<sup>i</sup>

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July 1, 2018

Luke 12:49-49

“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? “And why do you not judge for yourselves what is right? Thus, when you go with your accuser before a magistrate, on the way make an effort to settle the case, or you may be dragged before the judge, and the judge hand you over to the officer, and the officer throw you in prison. I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the very last penny.”

Do you believe your life includes the necessary ingredients for kin-dom living? I’ve generally thought that I do.

Let’s see... We come to church. We give some of our time, money and other resources to the church for God’s work. And we place God in an honored position in our lives alongside family, country and occupation.

And yet... today’s reading obliges us to ask if God expects more. Does God really support middle-class values?

What do we do when God demands more? How do we respond when we come up against the notion that we have to choose between God and social relationships? Between God and country? And that if we don’t choose, then by default we’re not putting God first in our lives.

These are the choices in front of us. No question about it. We may try to dodge Jesus’ words. We may try to deny that he speaks with urgency. But we’re only deceiving ourselves when we play that game.

Today’s scripture emphasizes how critical it is for all of God’s children to take immediate action. And I’m not talking about End Times. This is not an Eschatological sermon. I’m simply talking about centering our lives on God’s expectations for us – now.

When someone is slow as molasses – at doing their chores or in making a decision – you may have heard, “What do we have to do, light a fire under you?”

Jesus came to kindle a fire under us. Really.

Jesus was a revolutionary. With like songs like, “Jesus, Friend Forever,” “Jesus, Friend of Sinners,” “My Best Friend,” and “What a Friend We Have in Jesus.” But Jesus’ ministry was not nice and cozy. Jesus intended for his words and ways to change people’s lives. And they did, for at least the first generations of Christians. Today, few churches talk about Jesus’ radical ministry. Few practice that kind of radical ministry themselves. Yet this is exactly what Jesus calls us to. And what God expects of us.

You all came here on a summer morning when you could have done something else. Maybe you think I should go easy on you. But we need to ask ourselves the tough questions.

Jesus precipitated conflict and crisis wherever he went. When you get together with friends or family to grill out, do you ignore racist or other us vs. them comments because you don’t want to disturb the peace?

But peace is “not merely the absence of tension: it is the presence of justice.”<sup>ii</sup> In other words, the peace we use to placate opposition isn’t peace at all. Peace doesn’t come until there is justice for everyone. *(pause)*

“How are the children?” is the traditional greeting among the Masai people of Africa. If we asked ourselves that question today, we’d get a disturbing answer.

A couple weeks ago, the latest report on poverty in Wisconsin came out. In 2016 we heard about record low unemployment, this year the headline tells us that the rate of children living in poverty in Wisconsin *increased* by 20%.

Except it’s not a headline. Most people did not hear about it. Is it not newsworthy?

Jesus would have talked about this. At AC two weeks ago, we talked about child hunger particularly. Regardless of your philosophies or politics, this is not simply an issue. This is real people’s lives. As Bishop Jung said during his State of the Conference report, “Children of God are not issues.”

God calls us to disturb complacency. Insists, even. When I was at seminary and then seeking ordination, friends that know where I stand on the LGBTQ+ question, asked why I was seeking ordination in a church where these persons are considered 2<sup>nd</sup> class citizens. One of my seminary instructors – a brilliant gay man – had been brought up on charges in his denomination. One evening, I was working in the dining room, when I overheard some talk from the next table. He was explaining to some students that he saw his purpose as shaking the church’s tree. I nodded to myself and kept working.

Later, I adapted his words for my own call story. I sought ordination in the UMC because I need to do what I can to promote change, however small. And I have to be in the boat to rock the boat.

Too often in our lives, we’re more like corks bobbing on the ocean, though we’re less unable than unwilling to make waves. We do not aim toward kin-dom goals. We justify our inaction by saying, “I can’t make a difference anyway.”

Even if we can’t make a difference – and I don’t believe that – if we claim the name of Christian, we have to work for it.

Think of that man on his way to court in our lesson. No matter how much he might have put it off earlier, he can see that his time has come. He needs to work toward his own freedom by acting immediately, or he’s lost.

Jesus impresses on us the urgency of the situation.

You see, the truth is that we too are on our way to prison each time we reject overtures for kin-dom building. If our lives are not on fire for God’s intention we are living in a counterfeit freedom that does not lead toward wholeness, joy and hope. The freedom God offers gives us courage. It opens our senses to all that must be faced. The freedom we find through our nation, financial security or sense of privilege leaves us fearful and apathetic.

People will often stay in bad situations because they’re more fearful of what might happen if things change than they are with what they face now. In the same way, we can be more afraid of what true freedom might mean for us than we are of what our current bondage means.

So we stay with the status quo. Jesus tells us that the truth will set us free. But we have to choose to accept that truth.

We came into this summer sermon series with an attitude of wanting to see Jesus’ parables more clearly, to learn old truths that we may have lost. Parables are not innocent children’s stories. They’re, intended to be life altering.

We have trouble with Jesus’ urgency. We’re more comfortable with the idea of a gentle, gradual discipling process. But Jesus’ “Follow me” as he called disciples might have been brusquer and more demanding than we’ve always imagined.

Bill Lane Doulos says that many of Jesus’ parables are Trojan horse parables. Remember the Trojan horse? That stealth weapon that allowed the Greeks to sneak into the city of Troy ages ago. As we come to understand these stories, we may find ourselves indicted. Much as we’d like it to be otherwise, we’re the ones Jesus is talking about.

Before I close, what kind of freedom are you living in? Is it God's freedom that demands sacrifices, like speaking up for people who have no voice and sharing what you have as if there really is plenty for everyone? Or is it a nationalistic freedom that leaves you feeling powerless and at the whim of people who – whether you voted for them or not – are still just people, some of them trying to do the best for others, some not so much?

God expects better from us. In spite of how we often live, God intends for us to reveal God's kin-dom in the world and to the world. By the ways we live.

That's the freedom God has for us.

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<sup>i</sup> This sermon is taken from *Cotton Patch Parables of Liberation* by Clarence Jordan and Bill Lane Doulos, 32-43.

<sup>ii</sup> Martin Luther King.