

Proper 15 C  
Luke 12:49-56  
August 14, 2022

*“The Present Time”*  
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<sup>49</sup>“I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! <sup>50</sup>I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what stress I am under until it is completed! <sup>51</sup>Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division! <sup>52</sup>From now on five in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three;<sup>53</sup>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.”

<sup>54</sup>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. <sup>55</sup>And when you see the south wind blowing, you say, ‘There will be scorching heat’; and it happens. <sup>56</sup>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?

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For those of us who would say that Jesus’ was all about love, peace, and harmony, these words likely sting. I think we’d better begin with prayer.

*May holy fire be kindled in us anew in this day. May spirit blow onto the coals of our hearts and set us alight with passion for justice, for peace, for heaven’s realm in our midst. And may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts together be acceptable in your sight, our rock, our redeemer, and our friend. Amen.*

This is an especially difficult text to preach in no small part because this doesn't even sound like *my* Jesus. "I came to bring fire to the earth," he rants. "Do you think that I have come to bring peace . . . No, I tell you, but rather division!" This doesn't sound like *my* Jesus at all! This guy is blustering about fire and judgement and division and family feuds. My Jesus is about love and peace and harmony—who is this guy?!

Well, I'd love to be able to tell you that there was a mistake—that these were really someone else's words, but Luke places them directly in the mouth of Jesus so we've got to deal with them despite the discomfort they may cause us. The truth is, progressive churches like ours may struggle to hear these words of Jesus because we so often boil his message down to "love thy neighbor" or "turn the other cheek." We forget that Jesus too had big feels—that he was ever sad or disappointed or passionate or angry. We forget that Jesus was multidimensional—like us. We forget that Jesus wasn't executed by Rome for telling people to love their neighbors or to turn the other cheek. There was more, much more to his message than that.

Our reading from Luke's gospel paints Jesus in a very honest, very direct, and very human light. His mission, he states, is to bring fire. Fire is symbolic of judgement, but let's be clear, this judgement is not directed so much at individuals as it is at society. Jesus stands in the face of an unjust society and declares that heaven's realm has come and is coming—for the sake of those poor, those sick, those outcast, those strangers, those oppressed and undervalued. Heaven's realm has come and is coming, Jesus states, in flame to burn up the old realm of injustice and oppression and marginalization. But, like the wildfires that blaze in the natural world, the fire Jesus talks about also clears the way for new life.

Jesus is honest about the fact that his message isn't going to be well-received by everyone. It's a divisive message because those with a voice, those with wealth and power, are happy with things just as they are. Neighbor will turn against neighbor, and child against parent, and friend against friend in the battle against change. Jesus didn't just want everybody to get along in a realm of lopsided injustice. His ministry

wasn't just about bringing peace to a broken world. He dreamed of a new world with real peace rooted in justice.

The world of today and the world of Jesus' day share some striking similarities. Those with power fight to keep it, but often fail to use it to make much-needed change. Divisions abound: between political parties, social and economic classes, ethnicities and religions. Neighbors eye neighbors with suspicion, children blame parents for the way things are, and friendships end in disagreement but things don't really change, and real and lasting peace is as elusive as ever. Jesus called his hearers to "interpret the present time" and I believe he calls us to do the same.

So, what does that look like? What does it look like for us as individuals and as New England Congregational Church to interpret the present time? Let me start by saying what it does not look like. It does not look like surveying the realities of our world for signs of the end times, the fulfillment of so-called biblical prophecy, or evidence that Jesus' return is just around the corner.

Interpreting the present time does look like taking a good hard look at the world and acknowledging its brokenness—naming the fact that the way things are does not look very much like the world Jesus dreamed about. It means staring into the proverbial mirror and confessing the ways that we might be participating in, benefitting from, or responsible for the state we're in. And it means committing ourselves to doing things differently—doing things better. I know that may seem a bit overly simplistic, but the truth is, change really does start with us as individuals. One of the biggest lies ever told is that an individual doesn't have the power to effect real change. We do and we can!

Author and minister Edward Everett Hale once wrote:

I am only one,  
But still I am one.  
I cannot do everything,  
But still I can do something;

And because I cannot do everything,  
I will not refuse to do the something that I can do.<sup>1</sup>

Friends, that's us. We cannot do everything, but we can do something to change our world. We can have a civil conversation with that Democrat neighbor or Republican neighbor. We can bridge a divide and work on something that benefits the common good alongside an individual or group that looks or speaks or prays differently than we do. We can volunteer our time to serve those in need, to mentor children, to plant trees. We can partner with a local agency to build affordable housing or welcome immigrants. We can honestly name the ills that face our communities, our nation, and our world and instead of pointing fingers or laying blame, and we can put our heads together and try to find ways of addressing them together.

It's time for us as people of faith to "interpret the present time," as Jesus said. It's time for us to acknowledge our brokenness and shortcomings as a society; it's time for us to confess the ways that we might be participating in, benefitting from, or responsible for that brokenness and those shortcomings; and it's time for us to commit ourselves and our church to doing things differently—better—because we can and because we must. Sitting idly by is simply not an option.

I close with words of one who writes as a prophet through the pen of a poet, Mary Oliver. She writes:

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.

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<sup>1</sup> Edwin Osgood Grover. *The Book of Good Cheer: A Little Bundle of Cheery Thoughts*, Chicago: P.F. Volland, 1909.