

ὁ λόγος παρακλήσεως
Proper 15-C; 18 August 2019
Good Shepherd, Pitman – Todd Foster
(rev. 201908171543)

Fire

In nomine...

0. Greeting

Good [morning]! I bring you greetings from your neighbors at St. Thomas' Episcopal Church in Glassboro!

Last week I was preaching at St. John's in Salem and had drive nearly 60 miles round trip, if you include detours due to road construction. Today was a much shorter trip. Hello, neighbors!

I am thrilled to be here with you this [morning], and even more thrilled that Mother Susan is filling the pulpit and presider's chair back in Glassboro! Susan and I, along with several other local priests, meet together most weeks for Bible Study and prayer. This has become an important rhythm in my life, something that empowers me and encourages me for ministry in this place. And often when I meet with our little community and hear Susan's understandings of Scripture, I'll say to myself, "St. Thomas' needs to hear Mother Susan!" We each bring our own strengths, our own understandings, our own perspectives on Scripture. I believe that St. Thomas' will be better off for having heard the particular ways in which the Holy Spirit chooses to speak through Susan this [morning], and my prayer is that that same Spirit will, by the grace of God, empower me to utter some word that might be profitable for you as well.

I. Intro

So, who here is itching for a fight? Who enjoys a good argument, the more heated the better?

That's not me! Conflict is not my thing. There were many reasons I agreed to serve as an Episcopal Church: fights were not one of them! But one of the things I learned in formation as a priest was that sometimes a soothing word, a comforting murmur, is not the most loving thing to do. It can be a way of distancing from someone and making it clear that I don't want to hear your problems. Instead, if I see someone struggling with something, often the loving thing to

do, the connecting thing to do, is to step right into that fire, to put my finger on that sore spot, and to engage it directly. Not to rub it in, but to acknowledge openly its existence and to create a safe space in which the burden can be shared.

I learned this one day sitting with a woman in the hospital. She had just come through surgery and was telling me about what a great life she had and how proud she was of her children. It was not until I walked into the fire, asking about her tears which suggested to me something different from her words, that she opened up about her cancer diagnosis and the real conversation, the one for which God had brought me to her room, finally began.

II. Thesis

In our Gospel reading today, Jesus meek and mild, Jesus the one who has time for even the little children, Jesus the forgiver of sinners, Jesus the Good Shepherd, says some startling things. He says, “I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled!” Fire upon the earth is not a nice image. It’s not the stuff of comforting bedtime stories. It is instead an example of Jesus’ prophetic speech, his habit of speaking and acting according to the M.O. of all those prophets, men and women, we read about in the Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament.

Like the prophets, Jesus was ushering in the Kingdom of God into people’s lives. That means Jesus was bringing change. The world apart from God resists that change; the parts of us that are happy and satisfied resist that change. But message and mission of Jesus Christ in your life today is the same as it ever was: it is a message of change.

III. Isaiah

Change is the issue at hand in our first lesson today, from Isaiah. The prophet compares God’s people to a vineyard, protected and coddled with good things on every side. But that vineyard did not produce good fruit: instead of justice, they produced bloodshed. Instead of practicing righteousness, they caused the poor to cry out in their distress. And so the prophet promises God will not let the status quo stand. God is bringing change. From the point of view of God’s people, the vineyard, God’s response might feel like punishment. But from the point of view of their victims, those suffering from injustice and inequity, it comes as liberation, relief. The

Nazi's didn't like to see Allied troops marching through Europe at the end of World War II. But those in the concentration camps sure did.

Change is threatening and scary, like fire, to those who are invested in the status quo. Change is threatening to those who are comfortable. If you have a pretty home, a reliable car, a good job with a steady income and good prospects, you don't want anything to change, right? If you enjoy good health, a happy marriage, successful children, you'll go to great lengths to stave off any change, won't you?

All these good things serve as buffers, protecting us from the hard things in life, the harsh realities that many of our neighbors live with. The idea of *justice* is challenging in a society with lots of inequality because those who have more are often pretty happy with how things are, and have a vested interest in not seeing the problems. In not seeing poverty or racism or hunger. In not seeing discrimination or homophobia or arbitrary cruelty. Because these things all call into question our own privilege, the comforts and advantages we enjoy. Change is hard for those of us with something to lose.

V. Invitation

That's why it's hard for a rich person to enter the Kingdom of Heaven. Our wealth, our health, our goods and privileges are a protective hedge built around us. We can sit within the walls, afraid to rock the boat, bearing only wild fruit until finally the hedge gets torn down around us.

Sometimes it is the very grace of God that strips us of some advantage we enjoyed but which was preventing us from surrendering more completely to God's purpose in our life.

But we have another choice. We can choose to produce good fruit whatever our life circumstances. We can find out what justice means and make the sacrifices it takes to ensure that our lives our consonant with what God is doing in the world. We can name the injustices we find around us. We can acknowledge the injustices done on our behalf by the governments we had a hand in electing. We can name the evils done by the politicians we voted *for* as well as the politicians we voted *against*. We can speak aloud of the privileges we enjoy and use them to promote the welfare of others. We can spend our money and our time, our attention and our concern, in service to those who lack exactly those resources.

We can do this in our personal relationships, too. We can notice the hard places, the calcified places in our relationships, the scars from past battles where feelings have been hurt and there is no longer a healthy, living, loving connection. We can shy away from those spaces, which is a natural tendency for most of us. Or we can walk right into them, ripping open the scabs and saying, let's do better. Let's be honest. Let's actually talk. Let's figure this out. Maybe you have a relationship that's overdue for some change, some fresh effort, a fresh expression of grace and openness to the other.

Jesus is bringing fire into the world, and we get to decide how we're going to encounter that fire, that change, that challenge to our privilege and comfort. Do we see it as a threat? Or do we see the potential for the world becoming a better place, and align ourselves with just causes and purposes, giving of our selves and our resources?

VI. Conclusion

It was just in the last couple weeks or so that I missed another opportunity for conversation. There was some discomfort in the back of my mind, but I brushed it away and failed to ask the hard questions. I didn't step closer and offer the sacrificial love of Christ. Stepping into the fire is a hard thing to do: it's a hard thing even to notice the opportunity. That's why we continue to show up, to be present to one another and to practice sharing the love of Christ with one another. Because God is calling us to bear good fruit, fruit that will change the world, yielding a crop of justice and righteousness.

There's a fire coming. On which side of that fire do you find yourself?

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