

ὁ λόγος παρακλήσεως
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St. Thomas', Glassboro

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Collect

Almighty God, you have built your Church upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief cornerstone: Grant us so to be joined together in unity of spirit by their teaching, that we may be made a holy temple acceptable to you; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Genesis 22:1-14, Psalm 13, Romans 6:12-23, Matthew 10:40-42

1 Beginning: Once upon a time...

Let's remember together what's been happening the last few weeks. Jesus was traveling all over the region where he lived, proclaiming the good news of the Kingdom of God and curing all kinds of sicknesses. That sounds like something we could use some of today, doesn't it? Good news and a potent cure for what ails us both seem to be in short supply in many of our lives right now.

So what did Jesus do as he saw the need for Good News and healing exceeded his capacity to supply in a personal way? He didn't move to mass production and impersonal hierarchies. Instead, he commissioned the twelve apostles to go out and to do exactly what he was doing. He warned them that in doing so they would face persecution, that not everyone would like what they heard. He warned them that their message was going to be divisive, creating conflict even within families. He warned them that their message was not one of peace but of a sword, a *severing* of things that have been in order to make a way for something new.

Then we come to today's passage, the end of Jesus' instructions. Jesus speaks of those who will *receive* the apostles, that *receiving them* is like receiving Jesus himself, like receiving God. The reward for those who will *receive* the apostles is great indeed. One who receives a prophet or a righteous person is to be honored. One who shows the very basic hospitality of sharing a cup of cold water in a hot and dusty land is to be honored. How great, then, is the reward of the one who will receive the apostles' message? That person, says Jesus, will encounter none other than God, the Creator of the universe.

2 Middle: Tension: destabilizing

This sounds like pretty good news to me. That's why we go to church, right? We go to church to meet God, to encounter Jesus, to experience the Holy Spirit. We go to church to be in the presence of the divine, to connect to the really real, to taste reality. That's why we pray, why we read Scripture, why we pursue a life that's something more than food and clothing, job and recreation. Because we want to meet God.

And the key, says, Jesus, lies in receiving the words of the apostles. Like in our baptismal covenant, where when we refer to the "apostles' teaching" we're generally talking about the New Testament, or perhaps the larger ideas of the Gospel that flow out of the New Testament and the life of the Church.

But remember what Jesus warned the apostles about. He said they were going to have a very uneven reception. The good news they would proclaim would create just as much trouble as it resolved, because the Kingdom of Heaven is not yet come in all its fullness. The good news that Jesus is proclaiming, the good news the apostles are sharing, the good news that leads to one encountering God, is not good for everyone.

This past week I finished a book I was reading, *The Scandalous Gospel of Jesus* by Peter Gomes. Gomes reflects in his book that "Good news to some will almost inevitably be bad news to others."¹ This is because, says Gomes, "When Jesus came preaching, it was to proclaim the end of things as they are and the breaking in of things that are to be: the status quo is not to be criticized: it is to be destroyed."²

What Jesus does, you see, is he *interrupts* the status quo. God did not put on flesh and dwell among us because God thought things looked pretty great and maybe just needed a tweak here or there. Jesus did not choose the cross and walk toward it intentionally because things were generally OK. When God dies, that's a big deal. When the Creator is crucified by the creatures, there's a significant break being made. The Gospel represents major discontinuity with what has come before. The Gospel is, to put it simply, an interruption. It is unsettling. It is uncomfortable. To receive the Gospel of Jesus Christ with integrity always involves sacrifice.

That's why, if your religious practice always and only makes you comfortable: you're probably doing it wrong. If the message you're hearing from church, from prayer, from Bible study, fits neatly into the contours of your life, you're probably not hearing the Gospel. If the teachings of your faith are convenient, if they're familiar, if they're understandable, if they're universally comforting and encouraging, then you are being let down!

The primary work of the Gospel is not to comfort, but to disturb! Jesus came not to bring peace, but a sword! The church that follows Jesus is not one that is looking backwards to the way things used to be, but one that is looking forward to the promises of God! What God is going to do in your life is not to root you in place where you've been, but to induce you to change.

Jesus came to interrupt our lives. Jesus came to disturb us. Jesus came to bring change.

There are lots of interests around that see themselves as keepers of the status quo. The status quo is profitable for companies and investors. The status quo is efficient for the powerful and the successful. The status quo is calming for anyone who isn't suffering too badly at just this moment.

¹Peter J. Gomes, *The Scandalous Gospel of Jesus: What's so good about the Good News?* (HarperOne: 2007), 31.

²Ibid.

But Jesus came preaching a new Kingdom. Jesus came to blow up the status quo. Or, as Peter Gomes says, to destroy it.

3 Jesus is bringing a new day

Here's the deal with this. Jesus always, always had his eye fixed on what? On the Kingdom of Heaven. On the Kingdom of God. On the reign of God, on earth as it is in heaven.

The Kingdom of Heaven is near. Like it or not. The Kingdom of heaven is coming, and its inevitable. It doesn't depend on you or me. Getting ready won't make it come faster or slower. It's coming, like a big old comet heading right for the earth, and there's nothing you or I can do to change that fact. Because it's God at work.

For some people, for those who are not yet ready to acknowledge the sovereignty of God; for those who are not yet ready to love their neighbor as themselves; for those who are not yet ready to stop being first and to take a turn being last, for some of us, the coming of the Kingdom of God is *very bad news*. It's a threat. It threatens our image of ourselves. It threatens the very structure of our world. It threatens us with all the things we're scared of because there is no stopping it. We who are not ready yet can find images of ourselves all over the Bible. We are every person who ever opposed their will to what God was doing in the world.

But for others of us, the coming of the Kingdom of God is good news. The coming of the Kingdom of God fills us with hope and expectation. Like Abraham willing even to sacrifice his son Isaac whom he'd longed for all his life, we've managed to drop, to let go of, to sacrifice every other thing that we might have preferred to God's Kingdom and to place all our hope in Jesus instead. Because Jesus has always had his eye fixed on that time when God will wipe away every tear, when we will have no need of sun or moon because God's own presence will light our world day and night, when death will be no more, nor sickness nor disease nor injustice.

So again, we come to church to meet God. We come to church to be shaped, formed, changed in our attitudes and desires and expectations. We pray not to impose our will on God, but in order slowly, slowly, slowly, in prayer to be changed ourselves so that *God's* will is imprinted on *us*. We learn to lay *ourselves* on the altar, to exchange being first for being last, to love our neighbor as ourselves, to see things from the perspective of faith rather than through the eyes of culture or politics or the news. It is the life of faith, earnestly attended to, that will enable us to rejoice when Day of the Lord finally comes in all its awesome power.

We come to church to receive God by receiving Jesus by receiving the apostles, by receiving the prophets, by receiving the righteous persons, by receiving every precious child of God. Because even if all we have to offer is a cold cup of water on a hot and humid South Jersey summer day: that is enough. We, too, will receive a reward. We will encounter with our whole being the God who loves us.

Amen.