

August 15, 2004

“Holy Fired Up, Wholly Tired Out”

Hebrews 11:29-12:2; Luke 12:49-56

Preached by Rev. Dr. Ivy Beckwith

I look forward to the opportunities I’m given to preach. I enjoy the intellectual and spiritual wrangling that goes into putting a sermon together. So each time I’m given a specific Sunday to preach I check eagerly the scripture texts for that day anticipating the treasures contained in the narratives of the Old Testament lesson or the Gospel lesson. So I was dismayed, perhaps even disappointed, when I read today’s Gospel lesson. Instead of a story from the life of Jesus or an eye opening piece of Jesus’ teaching I found an angry Jesus ranting first to his close followers and then questioning the priorities of those in the crowd who had come to hear him. If I were to stand here this morning and preach words like those of Jesus, many of you would leave angry at my audacity or shaking your heads wondering what had gotten under my skin. Difficult sayings of Jesus like this caused Barbara Brown Taylor to say in one of her sermons that Jesus wouldn’t have made a very good parish minister. Perhaps, she says, he would have had 4 members in his congregation and most of them would have been fooling themselves that they truly understood what Jesus was asking of them. Jesus never massaged his message to make it palatable. So what was it he was so emphatic about in this passage?

Let’s look at his words and see if we can figure that out. Jesus says to the disciples: “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.” Or as Eugene Peterson paraphrases these words in the Message: “I’ve come to start a fire on this earth – how I wish it were blazing right now! I’ve come to change everything, turn everything right side up – how I long for it to be finished!” Most likely the kind of fire Jesus is describing is a refining fire not a destroying fire, a fire of purification and transformation. The word Jesus uses that is translated “stress” really means to be totally dominated by a thought, extremely focused, seized and occupied with one thing. In this case, Jesus is saying he is totally focused on his mission to transform all of creation back into what God originally intended it to be. Of course, he is including in this the mission of his upcoming crucifixion in his allusion to baptism but I think he’s speaking also of the whole redemption of creation that God is undertaking, the manifestation of the kingdom of God. Then Jesus continues on “Do you think that I have come to bring peace to earth? No, I tell you, but rather division!” Or again, from the Message: “I’ve come to disrupt and confront.” Then Jesus gives an example of this division or disruption which is surprising to both his listeners then and to the 21st century North American church now. “Households will be disrupted,” he says. “Father against son and son against father.” Startling and disturbing words to a first century audience because family relationships were the fabric of personal and cultural life at that time. Family’s conferred personal identity on their members and were the foundation of a peaceful and stable community. Families

provided financial and emotional support systems to their members. To deliberately divide and disrupt a family in the first century was hurtful to the family members, the society, and the culture. And this is a surprising example to us because we, too, live in a culture built around family structures and the church has been in the forefront of espousing family values and family stability.

I don't think Jesus is saying family ties are unimportant. The point Jesus is making is that those who choose to follow him on God's redeeming path, those who choose a life of making choices based on God's values, will walk through that fire of refinement and be transformed, be changed. And change always disrupts the status quo. Change has the potential to create crises in the systems that are being changed. Change can confront our most fundamental and foundational relationships and assumptions. People who follow Jesus, who choose to live first in the kingdom of God, will make others uncomfortable with their values and their choices. And, let's face it, most of us don't like to be made uncomfortable – most of us don't like to have our value and lifestyle choices questioned by anyone. And for many in Jesus' day and, even sometimes, in ours, following Jesus can cause family disruption and disruption in other important areas of our lives as well. Following Jesus, contrary to many messages that are out there today, does not necessarily make everything all better in the short run.

In the last part of the Luke passage, Jesus turns his attention to the rest of the crowd gathered around him. He points out how much attention they pay to the natural signs of impending weather – after all in this agrarian society weather was an important factor in their everyday lives. They knew how to read the sky because their lives and livelihoods depended on it. Then Jesus calls them hypocrites or actors who pretend because they either can't or choose not to read the signs of a spiritual change in the offing. They are missing the signs that the Kingdom of God is at hand. They are not paying attention to what is really important, Jesus says. They are not paying attention to the things that matter eternally. Their attention is given to the temporal and the trivial.

No comforting words from the Good Shepherd this morning. Instead we see a Jesus who wants to set the world on fire, a Jesus very focused on a mission to bring disruptive change and even confrontational crisis to those who choose to follow him into that baptism of fire in order to complete the establishment of God's kingdom. And, we see a Jesus castigating a crowd for holding on to priorities that don't reflect the coming of God's kingdom on earth. Why would anyone want to follow this man?

Hold on to that question and hold on to this picture of Jesus and his disconcerting words while we look at the epistle lesson from Hebrews. The author of Hebrews continues to write about the strong faith of people who followed God over the centuries prior to the coming of Jesus. Many of these people accomplished remarkable feats through their faith, kingdoms were conquered and justice meted out. God and their faith saw many of them victoriously through some very scary

things: a night spent in a den of lions or person –to-person combat with men with very sharp swords – not personal experiences many of us would volunteer for. But other people with the same kind of faith suffered dearly without some miraculous intervention. They were mocked, flogged, chained, imprisoned, stoned to death, sawn in two, killed by the sword, so destitute and tormented they wandered around in sheep and goat skins living in caves and holes in the ground. Not things associated with a very comfortable life and not things often associated with Christian living in our country today. And, to make matters worse, the author says that even though they went through all this hardship for their faith they never received, then, what was promised them. They never saw the realization of God’s plan. They never saw the fruit of the completed mission. The “not yet” continued to remain the “not yet” for them. Yet, they persevered.

Then at the beginning of chapter 12 the writer of Hebrews explains to the readers why the litany of Old Testament saints was included in this letter. The author of this book holds them up as examples of faith and as a group of witnesses to the lives of the Hebrew Christians. Biblical commentators have speculated that the intended audience for this letter was a group of Christians who were losing heart in their struggle to follow Jesus. Walking in the way of Jesus was just becoming too difficult for them and they were tiring of the path. So this group of Old Testament characters, very familiar to these Jewish Christians, is held up to them. “Look at the hardship they went through,” the author says. “And they are watching you right now – cheering you on in your efforts to love God and walk in the way of Jesus.” The writer compares the life of faith to a race – more like a marathon than a sprint. The marathon, as all you who have done it know, is a race that needs to be trained for and run with dogged perseverance. And even those who train well for a marathon will tell you that covering those 26 plus miles is an epic struggle, hard on the body and the mind. Marathoners are likely to suffer minor injuries like pulled muscles, blisters, and shin splints or can leave themselves open to more potentially dangerous medical crises such as heat stroke, water intoxication, or heart failure. Dr. David Greenes who is conducting a major study of runner’s health refers to a marathon as a “scheduled disease.” Dr. Arthur Siegel, a former marathoner, believes through his medical research that marathoning produces such acute injury to the architecture of the body that a massive inflammatory response ensues putting normally healthy runners at risk for heart attacks. One marathoner said this of the emotional and physical toll of the race, “I found myself shocked and unprepared when the ragged edges of fatigue surfaced through my veneer of cool composure. More than once I wanted to call ‘Time Out!’ somewhere around mile 12.” The Hebrew Christian readers of this letter were at mile 12 and ready to call “Time out.”

The difficulty of following Jesus can be compared to the difficulty of running a marathon or an ultra marathon. Following Jesus can be a struggle. Following Jesus can be hard and painful. Following Jesus does not always produce instant results. Following Jesus means you rarely come in first. Following Jesus can cause disruption and division in our lives when we challenge the status quo with

kingdom values. Following Jesus is not always entertaining and following Jesus is not always fun. I think sometimes we forget that Jesus' human life did not end in triumph. Jesus did not die a comfortable death after living a life of virtue and good works. Jesus did not even die in a battle fighting for justice and liberty. Jesus died the humiliating and painful death of a criminal. Jesus did not die a winner. Yes, he won the fight with ultimate evil and death, but the struggle, the pain, the disruption, and the suffering had to come first. That's why the writer of Hebrews uses Jesus as the perfect example of someone who kept going in spite of the trouble, in spite of the horror that was on the road ahead. Marathoners keep going because of the sense of accomplishment and personal self efficacy crossing the finish line brings. And Jesus kept going because he knew what he ultimately would receive – the joy of the right hand of God.

So I go back to the question I posed at the beginning who would want to follow a man who calls us to hold values and priorities that challenge the status quo; who asks us to give up our comfortable lives to live as citizens in the kingdom of God; who asks us to participate in a struggle when we live in a culture that avoids personal struggle at any cost? Well, 400,000 people run marathons in this country every year knowing that it's going to be a hard task, knowing that they are going to give up some things if they are to achieve their goals and knowing their bodies are going to hurt really bad during the race and for several days after they cross the finish line. But even though it costs them a lot, they still do it. Millions of people over thousands of years have chosen to live by God's values and follow this man who asks so much but who also gave more than he ever asks of us. Why have they done it? Because from Jesus they've caught a vision of what our world can be like – a vision of a world where love and justice reign. A vision of a world where evil is not even a distant memory, but something completely erased from our human brains. They've caught a vision of a world where God's perfect character is manifest in every corner of creation. They've been captivated by the true love story of God in human form sacrificing all for the redemption of the beloved creatures. And they've joyfully accepted the Creator's invitation and irresistible call to participate in this redemption as co-inheritors with Jesus and those Old Testament witnesses of the kingdom of God even though it may mean walking through fire and over scorching coals. Because, at the end of this road is the joy of the right hand of God.

Of the difficult words of Jesus to his disciples that we began with, I'd like to go back again to the words of Barbara Brown Taylor:

“Discipleship costs all that we have, all that we love and all that we are. That is less God's doing than our own. If the world were kinder to its reformers, discipleship might be a piece of cake, but it is not, and Jesus does not want anyone to be fooled.”

Following Jesus is not a part-time hobby. It takes all we have, but let us never forget that this Jesus we follow – we, also, call savior. He always gives us all we need for the journey, goes before us, and walks beside us.