



Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church
Asheville, North Carolina
August 18th, 2019
Rev. Samantha Gonzalez-Block
Sermon: "No Laughing Matter"
Isaiah 5:1-7
Luke 12:49-56

Isaiah 5:1-7

Let me sing for my beloved my love-song concerning his vineyard:

My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill.² He dug it and cleared it of stones, and planted it with choice vines; he built a watchtower in the midst of it, and hewed out a wine vat in it; he expected it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes.³ And now, inhabitants of Jerusalem and people of Judah, judge between me and my vineyard.⁴ What more was there to do for my vineyard that I have not done in it? When I expected it to yield grapes, why did it yield wild grapes?

⁵And now I will tell you what I will do to my vineyard. I will remove its hedge, and it shall be devoured; I will break down its wall, and it shall be trampled down.⁶ I will make it a waste; it shall not be pruned or hoed, and it shall be overgrown with briars and thorns; I will also command the clouds that they rain no rain upon it.⁷ For the vineyard of the LORD of hosts is the house of Israel, and the people of Judah are God's pleasant planting; God expected justice, but saw bloodshed; righteousness, but heard a cry!

Luke 12:49-56

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

⁵⁴He 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. ⁵⁵And when you see the south wind blowing, you say, 'There will be scorching heat'; and it happens. ⁵⁶You hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present time?

Well, it's finally happened, folks! Jesus has officially gone haywire! You know Jesus, that tender lamb of God, that grace-filled redeemer, that wooer of fisherman and nurturer of the most oppressed, the One who paints witty parables, the One who is the bridge-builder of the world? Yes, *that* Jesus, our Lord and Savior, has officially gone off the deep end! Now, he is shouting and finger-pointing, he is speaking of division and calling us all hypocrites! *What is going on?*

Here, we can imagine him as one of those brash party guests – the sort who takes it upon himself to stand up on a table and make an impromptu speech that *totally* kills the mood. We can imagine people whipping out their phones to capture his rant in real time, while his disciples roll their eyes and assure anyone who asks, “Nope, don’t know him.” “Never seen him before.” “Did not invite this guy.” “#Not my Savior!”

It is no wonder that today’s text is one that preachers actively avoid and parishioners skillfully skip over. We are a conflict avoidant people and we have promised to stand behind One we call the “Prince of Peace.” So, what do we make of *this* Jesus? And what good news can we possibly derive from a fed up, fired up Savior?

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I wonder what made Jesus so angry that day.

In our text today, we meet him towards the end of his life. Christ has spent three decades preaching, and prophesying, and leading by example. He has stood up to scribes and Pharisees – and all those in power. He has challenged, and healed, and welcomed, and made himself quite the target. Threats on his life have not stopped his holy work: he has charged forward alongside his disciples because this is what he came to do.

His words in our passage come not long before he is to enter the city of Jerusalem. He knows that the crowd of faithful ones will lay palms at his feet and sing Hosannas loud and strong, and yet he knows that that same faithful bunch will watch from a distance when he journeys to the cross, they will deny him, and abandon him. Jesus sees the hypocrisy brewing around him (disciples who can easily turn a blind eye, people who can be healed and yet fail to heal others). All this breaks his heart and angers him to his core.

This “Prince of Peace,” does not have time to share one more whimsical parable, or offer one more jaw-dropping miracle, now he is desperate for his disciples to practice what he has been preaching and teaching. He is hoping to awaken them to the truth of their human fragility. He urges them (and us) to be grander, bolder, more faithful, more courageous, more wise and more loving.

Surely Christ’s words speak to the hypocrisy ‘alive and well’ in our society today.

We live in a country that touts itself as being the greatest, and yet we know that we have the capacity to cage human beings, shoot innocents in our streets, subjugate black and brown bodies across the world, and stand by while our planet perishes.

We live in a country where we call ourselves ‘United States,’ and yet we let our own interests, our jealousy, our greed, our racism and sexism steer our actions and divide us evermore from one another.

Yes, we live in country where we pride ourselves on being a place of freedom where pluralism and diversity are celebrated, and yet we continue protect systems built on white supremacy and lift up Christian ideals as what is best for all people.

Jesus calls us out on this hypocrisy, not because he is having an off-day, but because now, more than ever, he needs us to step up our game – to be the disciples he has been preparing us to be.

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“I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled!” Jesus says,

The fire Christ brings is a divine flame.

Throughout the Hebrew Scriptures, fire is both powerful and dangerous, a holy element that represents God’s presence and glory. It is from fire that Moses first hears the voice of God, calling him to set the captives free. It is God’s fire that leads the people of Israel out into the wilderness. God uses fire to destroy enemies and refine impurities. Fire cooks and feeds, melts away and burns, topples cities and illuminates midnight.

And it is Jesus who John says has come to baptize us, not only with water, but with the Holy Spirit - *and with fire*.

We Christians have a tendency to say that the God of the Hebrew Scriptures is One of anger, and the God of the Gospel is One of love, but this distinction keeps us from truly understanding the fullness of God throughout our Biblical text. This God of fire was alive from the very beginning, and this Prince of Peace had that *same* fire burning within him.

Jesus did not come to gently warm our hands, but to set the world ablaze: to illuminate the pain and injustice in our world, to burn down our shortcomings and our fears. Jesus came fired up, yearning to ignite a fire in our bellies, eager to open our eyes to the realities of a hypocritical world - in desperate need of saving.

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This past Friday, I attended the opening performance of the show “Red,” at the Attic Salt Theater here in Asheville. The show follows the story of Marc Rothko, the famous abstract expressionist artist best known for his paintings, many of which contain no more than one two colors.

Rothko was born “Marcus Rothkowitz” to Jewish parents in Russia in the early 1900s, during a time of increased Anti-Semitism. Similar to my own family’s story, his family fled to the United States before his elder brothers could be forcibly drafted into the Imperial Russian Army because they were Jewish.

In this new “land of the free,” Rothko began to use his paintbrush as a way to express his pain. When he presented his work to his first art dealer, he was told there were already too many Jewish painters on the books, and so he was encouraged to change his name from Rothkowitz to Rothko (hiding his true identity beneath the bright colors).

In the show, Rothko is an unpleasant character to watch. He speaks severely to his assistant, asking him what he sees when he looks at this canvas – covered in one color.

“Red” his assistant says. But Rothko longs for him to see something more.

“But do you like it?” He asks. “What do you really see?” “What does Red mean to you?”

His assistant is perplexed and then overwhelmed with emotion.

At one point, Rothko is furious when his critics describe his work as “Pretty.” “Beautiful.” “Nice.” “*Fine.*”

“That’s our life now,” he says, “Everything’s fine. Well, let me tell you, *everything is not fine!* HOW ARE YOU?! ... HOW WAS YOUR DAY?! ... HOW ARE YOU FEELING? Conflicted. Nuanced. Troubled. Diseased. Doomed. I am not fine.” He says. “We are not fine. We are anything but fine...Look at these pictures.” He points to his paintings. “*Look at them!....Not nice. Not fine. Real. I AM HERE TO STOP YOUR HEART,*” he shouts, “*I AM HERE TO MAKE YOU THINK!...I AM NOT HERE TO MAKE PRETTY PICTURES!*”

Like Rothko in this moment, Jesus cries out to us, saying: “*What do you see? What does the world need? I am not here to make pretty pictures. Look harder...*”

Christ calls us to open our eyes in order to see beyond the surface level of our collective calling, to notice the hypocrisy we hold up, to recognize the ugliness, the pain, the brokenness, the abusive power - to name our part in it, and our need for God to give us the tools to repair it.

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Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division!”

Christ’s words throw us for a loop. What can we possibly make of this “Prince of Peace” who has not come to bring peace at all?

When we think about it, Jesus’ life never brought about peace. The announcement of his birth sparked turmoil for young Mary and Joseph. His first sermon in his hometown was met with murderous rage. And his life’s work put him in grave danger – and ultimately sentenced him to death on a cross.

We like to paint Jesus as this tender embodiment of peace and kindness (as we know it), But Christ was radically unsentimental, he was a political troublemaker, he was outrageous *and divisive*. Christ stood for certain truths – and he did not waiver from them - even until death.

Indeed, Jesus did not come to us in order to take a neutral stand, but rather to stand as God here on earth: to turn a broken world upside down, to comfort the afflicted, to afflict the comfortable, to unsettle social norms and systems in order to save us from ourselves.

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Christopher Morse and James Cone were two of my seminary professors, who never worried about being neutral or nice. They were passionate theologians who spoke candidly about God's call for us to run *towards* the places of greatest suffering.

Once in class, Christopher Morse explained that far too often, liberal minded folks make blanket statements about how all religions and ideologies are equally valid, really the same at their core.

He urged us to think more deeply about this: "Not every ideology demands equal respect." He said, "Each one must be measured by its ability to lift up love and justice. If an ideology spreads hatred or seeks to harm, then it should not be considered the same as an ideology that promotes inclusion, love and community. Nazism is not the same as Christianity. Homophobia is not the same as Radical Acceptance. Evil is not same as Good."

Morse pushed us to not see our faith in Jesus as a call to stand on neutral ground, but rather as a call to stand on the side of love and justice *always*.

James Cone, who is often called the Father of Black Liberation Theology, was prophetic and daring. I remember Professor Cone standing behind the lectern each week - banging it over and over again, speaking so passionately that rings of sweat formed around his shoulders.

Cone insisted that we interrogate our privilege and look for Jesus amongst the oppressed. He said: "If the Church is to remain faithful, it must make a decisive break with the structure of this society. It must become prophetic, demanding a radical change...Indeed the gospel is found wherever poor people struggle for justice, fighting for their right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness."

For James Cone, to be a Christian means to be daring enough to not concern ourselves with "keeping the peace," but rather to commit ourselves to doing God's work to liberate the most vulnerable among us.

Both Morse and Cone remind us that Christ's words draw a clear line in the sand. Christ asks us to boldly stand alongside him (even if those we love most demand otherwise). To be loyal to Jesus means we follow him – no one else, no matter what. It means to be willing to risk *everything* - in order to bring about God's kingdom here and now.

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*Christ's final words are this:
Why do you not know how to interpret the present time?*

So often, we stand behind the status quo. We look at our present time and make excuses for our silence, find reasons to hold back. We avoid conflict, stay neutral, choose to remain blissfully unaware of the needs of others. And then in comes Jesus – speaking harsh truth before our eyes (and it is no laughing matter). Christ's anger is urgent, severe and *righteous*.

His words call us to see ourselves and our society for what we really are. His words demand for us to be honest about our growth edges, our misplaced loyalty, our privilege and prejudice, our hypocrisy and our wavering faith.

Jesus does all this, says all this, because he has faith in us too – in our ability to engage in difficult discourse, to speak out for those long silenced, to stand alongside a God, who is always on the side of love and justice.

Friends, Jesus is the Prince of Peace because he has come to disrupt that which makes peace impossible. Christ has come to set the world ablaze, so that from the ashes something new and transformative can emerge. Christ is depending on us to see the flames bellowing, to get fired up, and to faithfully, fearlessly follow.

ⁱ John Logan. *Red*. Dramatists Play Service, Inc. (April 27, 2011)