



# ST BART'S

A Sermon by

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## Time to Get Off the Fence

*Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, August 14, 2022*

*The Tenth Sunday after Pentecost*

*Based on Jeremiah 23:23-29; Hebrews 11:29-12:2; Luke 12:49-56*

*In the Name of the One Holy and Living God. Amen.*

“Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division! From now on five in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three; 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... 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?”

Just a little light Bible reading for a lazy August morning ...

I must admit I was rather dismayed when I saw the Gospel passage I had been assigned to preach on today. “Jesus said, ‘I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled!’” Wait a minute. He came to bring fire to the earth? What happened to love your neighbor? Where’s the good shepherd? What about the Prince of Peace? Let’s talk about *that* Jesus instead. He’s so much easier to deal with.

But seriously, what are we supposed to make of this passage? There's no doubt that Jesus is in full fire-and-brimstone mode here. He is urgently warning his followers about the coming judgment with prophetic warnings of fire and signs and households divided. This is not the kind of nice, positive, easy-to-take message we want to hear—especially when we’re in the middle of our summer vacations. And it’s not the kind of reading we Episcopalians are ever particularly comfortable with, we of the three-legged Anglican stool that balances scripture with tradition and reason. There is nothing “reasonable” about what Jesus says here. Tearing families apart? Reading the signs of the times like the weather? Ridiculous!

If you were to read this passage out of context, you might think Jesus was some kind of holy war-monger bent on destruction. We know that’s not true. So how do we make sense of this passage in the context of everything else we know about Jesus?

In fact, if you’ve been paying attention to our Gospel readings over the past few Sundays, Jesus has been building up to this decisive moment for some time. And the preaching we’ve heard over these past weeks—without any advance planning or consultation among us preachers—has followed a thread of similar, overarching ideas in Jesus’ teaching, that culminates in our reading today.

You may remember that a few weeks ago, I spoke in my sermon about bringing your prayers to God with chutzpah and hope. Of putting your needs before God with boldness.

Then, two Sundays ago, the Reverend Peter Thompson, preaching on the parable of the foolish rich man, reminded us “that a life worth living is full to the brim with risk,” and that Jesus was the greatest risk taker of all, who invites us not to safety and caution, but to taking a risk.

And then just last week, the Reverend Natosha Reid Rice, preaching on a passage in which Jesus told his disciples, “Do not be afraid, little flock,” urged us to put fear aside. “The scripture commands us to be courageous,” she said, and “courage cannot be quarantined.”

Boldness. Risk-taking. Courage. Do you see a theme here? These are the qualities of discipleship that Jesus has been calling us to all along. He’s been calling us to be bold, to take a risk, to be courageous, because he knows we will need these things if we are truly going to be his disciples.

And so now the question becomes, what would happen if we actually *did* those things? What would happen if we actually *did* bring our needs before God with boldness? What would happen if we actually *did* take that risk? What would happen if we *did* act courageously? What would happen if we actually *did* step out in faith and hope as bold, risk-taking, courageous followers of Jesus? What do we expect might happen?

We might imagine that the path of faith, hope, and love will be smooth. We might hope that if we take that leap of faith, that everything will work out fine, that our lives will be pleasant and easy. We all like a happy ending. I know I do.

But the path that Jesus has laid out for us is anything but easy. He knows it will test us, and challenge us, and try our spirits. And that’s why he tells us to be bold, to take a risk, to have courage, to not to be afraid. And so, after laying that groundwork for us, Jesus announces with harsh and demanding language that the time has come for us to act. The time for waiting is over. The time for indecision has passed. Are we going to follow false prophets who make people forget the name of God? Or are we going to follow the one who speaks God’s word faithfully? Do we believe in the truth of what this prophet Jesus is saying? Or will we go home and forget we ever met him? Jesus is letting us know it’s time to get off the fence.

His call to us is urgent. Imperative. And it’s uncomfortable. “Do you think I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division!” When we hear these words, we may want to water them down or maybe just skip over them entirely. “Well, all that talk about breaking up families is really just metaphorical.” Or we decide that Jesus probably never said these things at all. Why do we feel the need to deny these harsh and uncomfortable words? Are we trying to re-make Jesus into the prophet we want him to be? Are we hoping to make the path of following him easier for ourselves?

Jesus’ words cause us to consider just how much we are willing to give to him, who gave so much to us. If we are truly followers of Jesus, then his path is our path. His trials are our trials. His path was painful and difficult. It caused a separation in his own family. It led to his suffering. It demanded his life.

True discipleship has a cost, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote, and it doesn’t come cheap. Discipleship isn’t merely lukewarm acquiescence to a general set of principles. True discipleship demands something of us: a commitment to follow wherever Jesus leads. True discipleship should make us uncomfortable in the world as it is. True discipleship doesn’t settle for things as they are but seeks to transform the world with justice, mercy, and humility. True discipleship doesn’t try to split hairs by asking “who is my neighbor?” True discipleship knows that we are all the neighbor.

What if boldness, risk-taking, and courage became the watchwords of our faith? What if our actions matched the convictions of our hearts? What extraordinary things could we do together as disciples of this loving, liberating, life-giving God?

It's true that the path won't be easy, so we run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. Jesus the pioneer, the one who blazed the trail, the one who set the course, the one who went before us to show us the way. All we need to do is get off the fence and take that first step.

What are you willing to give? How are you willing to serve? How is God calling you? The world needs what you have to offer. If you're wondering how to begin—how to take that first step—think about volunteering at church. August is volunteer recruitment month here at St. Bart's. Take a look at the insert in your leaflet or on the website to discover all the different ways to get involved. Be bold! Take a risk! Try something new! Get uncomfortable!

So what's the good news here? Where can we find comfort in these uncomfortable words? For me, it is in Jesus' acknowledgement that true discipleship is hard. And if it gets hard, well, that's okay. Jesus never said it would be easy. There's no guarantee that the road ahead will be smooth, but the good news is, we never travel that road alone. And the peace that we seek, the peace Jesus offers, is not the transitory peace of this world, that's here one day and gone the next. The peace Jesus offers is the peace that passes all understanding. It is a peace beyond measure.

Amen.

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