

The Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost
August 14, 2016
Proper 15, Year C

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Isaiah 5:1-7
Hebrews 11:29-12:2
Luke 12:49-56

From Hebrews: “Yet all these, though they were commended for their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had provided something better so that they would not, apart from us, be made perfect.” In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

This is a remarkable statement. After a long list of holy men and women who had performed miracles, shown great courage, and suffered painful deaths, the author of Hebrews says that they did not receive what was promised to them. Why not? Because God had provided something better for them. And when would they get it? After we came. They would not be made perfect apart from us. I have to admit that I do not fully understand this text. But this much is clear: it has to do with community. It has something to do with the unity of the Body of Christ and the People of God. We are all in this together. Even the very best of us cannot attain perfection in isolation from the community. God does not save individuals; God saves a people. We are all in this together.

This is part of a truth that is so well known that there are innumerable examples, fables, illustration, metaphors, and figures to communicate it. The branch that is cut off from the vine withers and dies. The finest threads when wound together into a rope can lift the greatest weights. When a single stick will break, a bundle will not. Or Paul’s figure of the Body of Christ. If the hand is removed the body is not whole and the hand will die. Mountain climbers will perish if they are not roped together. In the monastic tradition, one cannot be a hermit just by

going away by oneself. One has to be a member of a community first and get permission to follow this particular vocation from that community. Even a solitary is bound to others by vows and by love.

The well-known spiritual, *Swing Low, Sweet Chariot*, has a less well known stanza: "If I get to heaven before you do, I'll cut a hole and pull you through." We cannot attain our spiritual goal, we cannot attain perfection without each other. One of the great lessons of the magnificent book, *The Boys in the Boat*, is that the crew of oarsmen cannot succeed unless they truly give themselves to each other and to the boat as whole. (By the way, I just discovered that you can see on line documentary footage of the race in 1936 when the American eight took the gold.)

And this brings us to the equally odd passage from the Gospel:

Jesus said, "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! 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." At first this does not sound like a call to unity. He's talking about division. But on closer inspection we see that Jesus is simply point out a natural human truth. He is calling his disciples (and us) to follow him and to be part of a new community he calls the Kingdom of God. This new community will be one of love and unity and power and joy. But to join it means leaving or at least relativizing our natural relationships with our biological families, our tribes, and out nations. It means that our identity will be defined by our relationship to Jesus rather than our family name, our nationality, our class, or our political party. This is why Jesus says in another

place, "Who are my mother and brothers? Pointing to his disciples he says these are my mother and brothers. Whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother." In short, Jesus is redefining the family. This is revolutionary and destabilizing to society. It means that those who choose to follow Jesus may have to choose to abandon their natural families or at least some of the values of their upbringing.

In my own life I experienced this to a small extent. I was raised in a family that placed a very high value on education and scholarship. Both my parents were Ph.D.'s. They had degrees from Vassar, Bryn Mawr, and Princeton. I entered Yale after high school. After I had given my life over to Jesus and was trying to be his disciple, the time came when I felt that Jesus was asking me to leave Yale and carry on a street ministry in the slums of New Haven. My parents could not understand this. I was very fortunate that my parents loved me more than they feared for me, and there was no rupture. But that is a testament to their ability to let a child find his own way. Still I was choosing a very different set of values by which to steer my life.

So when Jesus says, "Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division," this is what he is talking about. As people join this movement to build the Kingdom of God, what our Presiding Bishop calls "the Jesus Movement." It will cause resistance. There will be push back from the world. And when we try to perceive the changes of our times, we read the signs. He 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. And when you see the south wind blowing, you say, 'There will be scorching heat'; and it happens. 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?" Or as a more recent prophet of change put it forty years ago, "You don't need a weatherman to know which way the wind blows."

So let's pull this all together. Jesus calls us into a new community, a people, a movement to establish a new way of being on earth that he calls the Kingdom of God. This new community is at odds with and challenges the values of the surrounding culture. It values generosity over acquisition, vulnerability over self-protection, freedom over coercion, relationships over individualism, peace over violence. Others will take offense, or become frightened, or simply ridicule us. Yet it is in this community in this Kingdom that we find our truest selves. It here that we find joy. It is in this community, entangled in relationships with this incredible hodgepodge of saints and sinners, that we will be made perfect, that is, complete and whole.

Thy Kingdom come, on earth as it is in heaven.