

**Haydenville Congregational Church**  
**The Rev. Dr. Andrea Ayvazian**  
**August 15, 2010**  
**Luke 12:49-56**

**“I came to bring fire...”**

*May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts  
be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord Our Strength and Our Redeemer. Amen.*

Earlier this week my sister Gina sent me an e-mail message that said: make sure you read the article about congregations and ministers in the Sunday **New York Times Week in Review**, it's on page 9. Gina was so eager for me to read the article that a couple of days later when my partner Michael went over to borrow her car, she send the article home with him. I am glad she did. It is a whopper.

The title of the article is *Congregations Gone Wild*, it is written by G. Jeffrey MacDonald, a United Church of Christ minister. MacDonald writes with eloquence about how pastors are burning out not just because they work too much, not just because they take too little vacation, but because, he says, congregations pressure ministers to forsake their highest calling.

These are his words: “The pastoral vocation is to help people grow spiritually, resist their lowest impulses and adopt higher, more compassionate ways. But churchgoers increasingly want pastors to sooth and entertain them.” MacDonald goes on to say that religion has become a “consumer experience” (he calls it “consumer-driven religion”) and in the process clergy are growing more unhappy and more unhealthy. Discussing this shift in focus happening in many churches, MacDonald says: “In this transformation, clergy have seen their job descriptions rewritten. They’re no longer expected to offer moral counsel in pastoral care sessions or to deliver sermons that make the comfortable uneasy. Church leaders who continue such ministerial traditions pay dearly.”

MacDonald then goes on to reveal this about his own experience in a UCC church: “I have faced similar pressures myself. In the early 2000s, the advisory committee of my small congregation in Massachusetts told me to keep my sermons to 10 minutes, tell funny stories, and leave people feeling great about themselves. The unspoken message in such instructions is clear: give us the comforting, amusing fare we want or we’ll get our spiritual leadership from someone else.”

Well there are no coincidences, just God's grace. And here we are today...Gina brought THIS article to my attention the very week that the Lectionary throws the Luke 12 passage at us for study and reflection. Here I am holding the newspaper in one hand and the Bible in the other. MacDonald's article says without equivocation that church-goers want to be comforted, soothed and entertained or they will find another church. AND the passage from Luke that I am supposed to preach on is a rant by Jesus who shouts and scolds: "I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled....Do you think that I have come to bring peace ...? No, I tell you, but rather division! 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?"

Oh dear. Oh dear.

How does one preach on this text and be comforting, soothing and entertaining? I am sure MacDonald's "small congregation in Massachusetts," would have preferred that he skip right over this text in Luke and choose instead the lovely stories of Jesus as tender Shepherd. Maybe you would too. Keep Jesus docile, make him gentle, preach on the comforting and comfortable Jesus. Maybe we would all prefer that.

The problem is: there is this passage in the Gospel of Luke and we avoid it at our peril.

The problem is: the firebrand Jesus is Jesus too and we cannot ignore that.

The problem is: Jesus was complicated and multi-layered.

The problem is: Jesus may have been fully divine, but he was also fully human.

Yes, Jesus had a tender Shepherd side. Praise God. We heard earlier in Lillian's baptismal service that Jesus, the gentle teacher and friend, said "Let the children come to me." Jesus WAS tender, gentle and nurturing. That's all true.

But Jesus was also fiery, revolutionary and dangerous.

We need to let Jesus be both.

We need to embrace the man for who he was.

We need to let Jesus be fully Jesus.

Theologian John Dominic Crossan says: "**How we think about Jesus matters.**"

So we need to think about Jesus in complex and multi-layered ways to fully understand his message and to fully live out his teachings.

The gentle Shepherd, tender brother, loving teacher is pure Jesus. And the radical Jesus we find in today's passage--angry, condemning and aggressive—is pure Jesus as well.

Let's figure out what he is saying here, why he is so worked up, and the lessons this difficult passage holds for us.

First, let's place Jesus in the context of his time.

In Jesus' time, the Jewish homeland of Israel was a small area, with small cities—a geographical area about the size of Vermont. This little plot of land inhabited by the Jewish people was attacked and occupied almost constantly for the 600 years prior to Jesus' birth by the armies of the Babylonian, Persian and Hellenistic Empires.

The social, political and economic world Jesus grew up in had 4 dominant features:

- 1. It was ruled by a monarchy, a few elites who made all the laws and had ultimate and unquestioned authority;*
- 2. It was dependent on an exploitive system that worked the peasant class nearly to death in the service of the elites;*
- 3. The monarchy was religiously legitimated, meaning it was believed the Emperor was divinely appointed and had divine powers and rights;*
- 4. The Roman Empire, which occupied Israel during Jesus' life, kept order through violence and oppression and engaged almost constantly in war. It was a time of extreme brutality.*

It is in this context of imperialism, militarism, exploitation and poverty in the peasant class that the peasant Jesus is born. It is in this world that the young Jesus is radicalized and begins to talk about the kingdom of God, as opposed to the kingdom of Caesar. It is in the face of bone-crushing oppression and exploitation that Jesus begins to imagine what life would be like if Caesar did not sit on Caesar's throne but God sat on Caesar's throne. It is into a world of complete domination by a foreign power that Jesus is born, and he is a Jew—a member of the group that has been attacked and oppressed for six centuries.

The child Jesus is an enigma from the start. The people are warned that he will be a trouble-maker, that change is coming under his leadership and that he will be opposed. Listen to the words of Simeon who makes this prophesy when Jesus as an infant is presented in the temple: "This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul."

Right from the start, when Jesus was still a baby, it was known that he would provoke disruption and dislocation, what we might today call revolution. That is what he came to accomplish.

Jesus' mission during his earthly life was one of danger and crisis. He did not come to tinker on the margins of society. He came to challenge the status quo, to declare that emperors and kings were not vessels of God's divine light and power but violent and exploitive rulers who oppressed and persecuted the common people. Furthermore, Jesus declared that those common people, the peasants, the disposable, throw-away class in Caesar's eyes were HIS people, God's people and that God held a special place for poor people in the kingdom of God. Jesus came to reverse the conventional wisdom of who mattered in the world—he had the nerve to proclaim that the first shall be last and the last first and the meek, not the wealthy, would inherit the earth.

Jesus came to challenge the accepted social, political and economic norms of his time. He was the leader of a movement, now called the Jesus Movement, that sought to empower the nobodies in society to claim their rightful place in the kingdom of God and not to conform to the prevailing culture of the time. Jesus was a radical—a remarkable, brave, prophetic, courageous, destined-to-die-for-his-beliefs-and-behaviors radical.

John Dominic Crossan says that the Jesus Movement lived by this outrageous principle: *Heal the sick, and eat with those you heal. And the kingdom of God will be present to you in that moment, in acts of mutuality, hospitality and reciprocity.*

During his ministry, Jesus talked about the kingdom of God more than he talked about anything else....and that was a bold and risky theme to keep harping on. The kingdom of God stood in sharp contrast to the kingdom of Caesar. Those subjugated and oppressed Israelites were not to even whisper about the possibility of ANOTHER kingdom.

And so today we stumble upon this controversial and difficult passage in Luke. In it, our beloved Jesus comes clean: he does not pretend, mince words, cloak his meaning in parables, gussy up his speech with metaphors, or dilute what he needs to tell his followers. No, not this time. Jesus says what he needs to say directly: *'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.'*

*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?’*

Here a frustrated and somewhat desperate Jesus is telling his followers: you are better (and more interested) in predicting and talking about the weather than about the social, political and economic systems of oppression under which you live. You think I came to bring peace...think again. I came to bring JUSTICE. And there will be conflict, not peace, as we travel the road toward JUSTICE.

I came to bring fire Jesus says, FIRE being a favorite Lukan image for judgment. Fire destroys as well as refines and purges. Jesus came to destroy the system of domination his people lived with under Caesar and for centuries before that. Jesus is saying: I came to destroy that system, to replace the kingdom of Caesar with the kingdom of God. Jesus’ fire imagery is meant to convey the destruction he envisions, and the refining and purging that is coming.

And Jesus shouts about division. As one translation of the Bible puts it, “I came to make people choose sides.” Whose side are you on? he wants to know. The side of the elites, the power-holders, the oppressors, the rulers, the Emperor? Or God’s side? Are you with me or against me? Jesus is talking about division: deciding, standing up and announcing whose side you are on.

I did not come to bring peace if peace maintains the status quo, that is what Jesus is saying. “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...father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother...” Jesus is even challenging the accepted family structure in which the father ruled the roost and the other family members were subservient. Even that will be scrutinized. And family members will disagree on that issue and they will fight...some will prefer the old, the familiar, the oppression they have always known, and some will break into freedom and embrace equality and stand against their very loved ones.

*Jesus 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. <sup>55</sup>And when you see the south wind blowing, you say, “There will be scorching heat”; and it happens.*

<sup>56</sup>*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?*

“You hypocrites” this wild Jesus yells. You know more about the weather than the system of oppression you live under. Wake up! Who cares about the weather? Care about justice, speak out for fairness, rise up for righteousness.

This is strong stuff. Strong stuff which, according to Rev. MacDonald in last Sunday’s **New York Times**, parishioners do not want to hear. MacDonald says parishioners want pastors to comfort, soothe and entertain them. And that would be just fine if Jesus, who we follow, had been a prophet, teacher, preacher and healer who in his ministry only comforted, soothed and entertained. But to be true to the true Jesus, we must tackle passages like this troubling one in the Book of Luke and say: wow. Jesus was many things, including a revolutionary who spoke out against injustice. And for that he lost his life. Jesus was not killed because he was too nice. He was nailed to a cross by the Roman army because he was too radical, because he preached about the kingdom of God while he was a subject in the kingdom of Caesar.

In the **First Light** DVD series that many of us viewed over a couple of months this spring, John Dominic Crossan looks straight into the camera and says this: “Jesus’ program was not about charity, not about alms-giving. It was about justice. If your ministry is about charity, you will be canonized. If your ministry is about justice, you will be crucified.” Crossan goes on to say: to be faithful to the true Jesus, churches should not “pass the peace” in worship they should “pass the justice”...peace will follow.

And so I close this sermon with an apology.  
If you came here today, and we have a number of visitors with us this Sunday, to be comforted, soothed and entertained, I am so sorry.

I am trying to be faithful to the tender Shepherd Jesus who was also the fiery, radical Jesus. My prayer for each one of us is that we find our way...studying Jesus’ own words, discerning the lessons in the sermons he preached, and emulating the life he led. May we carry on, each day, as best as we are able, to be faithful to our calling as members of the Jesus Movement, true Christ-followers, in what is still a beautiful but broken world.

Amen.