



**Sermon for Sunday, August 19, 2007, 11:15 a.m.**

**12<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost**

**The Rev. Brenda G. Husson**

Jeremiah 23:23-29

Luke 12:49-56

When you are a priest at St. James' Church, one of the things that you get to do is premarital counseling, and quite a lot of it. Over the years, most of us develop our own patterns about what we ask and in what sessions we ask these particular questions. Most of us, and most clergy I know at places other than St. James', enjoy doing that counseling. It's always fun to get to know a couple in the kind of depth that you have when you talk to them over those sessions.

Well, one of the questions that I usually ask each person individually fairly early on is, "Tell me, what for you is a hot spot?" And then, of course, I have to explain what I mean by that. And what I mean by that is: what is it that maybe irrationally, but also predictably, just sets you off? We all have these things. Mine, for example, is crowds. I do not do well, I cannot carry on a conversation. I get quite anxious when I am being jostled in a crowd. This is rather ironic because one of the reasons I moved to New York is because I love the theater. So while I am trying to get to the theater in Times Square, I am among the most miserable people you can encounter. But I'm really happy once I get there. Crowds are my hot spot.

We have this conversation so that they can remember in the course of their marriage that there are just times when you should not bring up an important topic with your spouse if you want any kind of a reasonable response. It's good to identify those times, and therefore be prepared. Of course, if you don't know about those hot spots when you run into someone with whom you haven't had that conversation and you're getting that kind of response, you're likely to find yourself saying, "Jeesh! What's the matter with him?" Or, "Man, what's the matter with her?"

I suspect that a number of us in reading and hearing this particular passage from the gospel find ourselves thinking about Jesus, "Jeesh, what's the matter with him?" This one who says: "Do not think I came to bring peace. I came to bring division." Not the image we want when we think of Jesus as the good shepherd. Not the image that most of us carry around when we think about our relationship and what we hope our relationship with

Jesus will be. As a result, we tend to have pretty much two responses to this passage and the others like it that we'll find in the gospels. Our first option, of course, is just to ignore it, to just skim right over that, file it away, figure "I don't know, it's some kind of aberration. I don't know why it's in there."

The other thing that people choose to do, I've discovered, is to see it as some kind of a throwback, some moment, some glitch in the gospels, that takes us back to what we sometimes refer to as the God of the Old Testament, that wrathful, angry God. Neither of those are actually good or effective solutions. First, three out of the four gospel writers felt compelled to include these words of Jesus, or ones very like them, so obviously they thought they were pretty important. And the reason we have the Old Testament and the New Testament together in the Bible is because we don't have two separate Gods. We have one God in three persons. So while we may not like those passages that show us God's anger, something we see pretty often in the prophets, the prophets like Elijah and Amos and Isaiah and Jeremiah whom we heard today, though we may not like that voice, it is part of the voice of God, and part of the voice of God that we need to hear. So not ignoring it, not trying to write it off as some throwback, we may try and figure out, "Well, what went wrong? What set Jesus off?"

I actually did that in thinking about this sermon, so I went back to the preceding verses and the preceding couple of chapters, and the truth is that nothing went wrong. Jesus did not just have a really terrible encounter with the Pharisees. Nor did he have one of those moments where his disciples, Peter or one of the others, completely misses the point. Right before these harsh words, Jesus is teaching, telling parables about being prepared for when God comes, about getting ready and knowing that you always have to keep watch.

So the question, I think, needs to shift. The question needs to shift from "Jeesh! What's wrong with him?" to a harder one: "What's wrong with *us*?" Because that's really the issue at the heart of this gospel. At this point in Jesus' ministry, he has, as Luke so wonderfully puts

it, set his face toward Jerusalem, and indeed in this passage he talks about the baptism of suffering he is to undergo. He is headed to Jerusalem. He is full of foreboding about what awaits him there, and what has happened (why he is full of foreboding) is that after months of ministry, ministry that has involved healing the sick, cleansing the lepers, forgiving the sinners and feeding the hungry, he is the target of fierce and what will be unstoppable rage. He has forgiven sins, welcomed the outcast, healed the sick, fed the hungry, and the world is furious with him. He has followers to be sure, but he has far more enemies than friends. Jesus' harsh words remind us that all of us live in a world in which it is easy to look around and see those who are outcast, see those who are excluded, see those who are hungry and poor, see those who are sick, and say to ourselves, "You know, it's always been that way. You know, it still is. And you know what else, it always will be", and then sit right back down in our comfortable chairs and go on with our lives. Jesus instead came down from heaven to say, "The way it has been, the way it is now, and the way we think it always will be is not the way of God." The way of God is to do justice and love mercy, offer forgiveness and raise up the poor. And that was enough to make people angry enough to kill Jesus.

Jesus is absolutely right and absolutely straightforward in this story, because what he says in this portion of the gospel is that when we take the gospel seriously, it will be a source of peace and justice, love and reconciliation, **and** those very things will cause division, because those very things will put you at odds with the way the world works and the peace we make with injustice. Those very things, if we join with Jesus, will set us against many of our neighbors, perhaps many of our friends, and perhaps even some of those within our own family.

This is a very powerful lesson. I also think it is a very important one, because it reminds us that going back to the prophets, in Jesus' own time and in the work of the disciples who followed after him, we have always been called to seek a different kingdom than the one in which we live. We have always been called to speak the truth, even when the truth is uncomfortable. We have always been called to be people who offer forgiveness and reconciliation, even when our best judgment tells us that is folly, and we have always been called to be people who look first to the needs of the poor and the outcast. It's a shame, I think, that this lesson is appointed for the middle of August, because in the middle of August, what with traveling and everything else, there will be plenty of people who will not be in church, and will not hear these lessons. But we are here, and we are part of a community that has made a commitment to live the truth of the gospel. As we look towards the start of a new year here at St. James', a new year that will start in just three or four weeks time, this is a wonderful lesson for us to hear, so that we as individuals and as a community can think again and think anew about the ways in which we are called to challenge the world in which we live, even as we love this world that God made.

One of my hopes is that as people walk by St. James', they will say a couple of things. One I know they always say, because I hear it all the time. They walk by and they say, "What a beautiful church!" And it is that. But I hope also that those who walk by will also be able to say, "That is a church that is doing the work of Jesus", and some, when they say that, will shake their heads in scorn, but some when they say that will come in knowing that this place, being a home for Jesus, can be a home for them as well.

*Amen.*