

Sermon (Luke 12: 49-56, 8/14/16):

This past Monday evening we went to a Valley Cats Minor league baseball game. It was the perfect night for such an outing. A welcome break from the hectic day that preceded it.

The poor Valley Cats didn't fare so well out there on the field, but in the stands, with my hot dog, peanuts, and root beer, I couldn't have been happier. It was a rare moment with my family, including both of my children! Yay! All was well.

It's a summer time ritual for us. We look forward to it each year. We try to catch at least a few games at the Joe Bruno stadium. It's a great way to spend some time together, enjoying a summer's evening.

It's a little hard to believe it's the 14<sup>th</sup> day of August already and many of these baseball games are now behind us. The coveted summer months seem to fly by so quickly. I really like the summer, as I'm guessing you do too. I don't have as many night meetings, I look forward to taking some weeks off, I enjoy having a little more time for my family, and the more relaxed mode of our Sunday morning worship is a welcome break albeit it can surely get a little toasty in here.

So, here we are, it's still summertime and relax mode is still in full swing. You would think the designers of the lectionary, who selected the scripture texts for this morning, would have had this in mind. You would think they would have picked something, well, a little more summery – birds in their nests, bunnies sniffing the green grass, maybe even a few farmer's markets. There's got to be a farmer's market somewhere in the Bible, right?

Maybe this would have been a good day for when Jesus said, 'Consider the lilies in the field. You don't see them worrying about their next meal yet there they are in all their beauty, clothed in a finery that even King Solomon couldn't match!' Gardens, by this time, have fully taken and are flourishing. It's easy to imagine a beautiful flower. Oh to be able to trust God will provide like one of those flowers!

Flowers, bunnies, ripe corn, baseball games (there was baseball back then, right?) are not what we get. Instead, we get a cranky Jesus in full slap down mode.

Perhaps today's words from Jesus are among the most difficult he said. For one, they seem so contrary to the Jesus we've gotten to know. The Jesus who heals the ill, mends the lame, feeds the hungry, forgives the unforgivable, eats with the ostracized, lives and breathes grace. When Jesus was born, the angel choir sang 'peace on earth' and, boy, did that catch our attention in this world where peace seems so elusive. 'Peace on earth...' That's the kind of hope we placed in this newborn in a manger but today, from the lips of the now adult Jesus, we hear this,

'Do you think I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but

rather division. Households will be divided – father against son, son against father, mother against daughter, daughter against mother...’

Oh, come on, Jesus, this is August...summertime...family reunions, family vacations, fun and laughter, peace and harmony...right?

Well, I guess that depends. To be honest, my experience is that family reunions and vacations can also be quite tense affairs. Bottling up an extended family in the cramped quarters of a single house or, even worse, a tent in the woods doesn’t leave a lot of breathing space. Eventually someone bumps into someone and ‘boom’ the already high-octane fumes explode.

I remember asking a friend who had just returned from a big family reunion trip how it went. ‘Well, it was good,’ he said, ‘but I’m kind of glad to be back at work in my office.’

You know how it goes. There are all those unwritten rules that families learn to observe in order to keep the fragile peace while they’re together.

“Whatever you do kids, please don’t mention the Presidential election, or same gender marriage, or global warming, or Chinese food, or my sister’s tomato sauce, or money in any way, shape, or form! You know how Uncle Tim gets. You know what that will lead to with Grandpa Joe. You know what Aunt Sylvia will do. You know how Grandma Ethel’s eyes will fill with tears as she runs from the room wondering where she failed as a Mother.”

The wonderful thing about families is that they’re close, they know they’re stuck with each other, and they know how the beloved other ticks. The challenging thing about families is that they’re close, they know they’re stuck with each other, and they know how the beloved other ticks.

*Periodically, my extended family gets together for lunch and, to put it lightly, it’s interesting to see some of the dynamics that go on. Now, don’t get me wrong, I wouldn’t trade this time with my family for anything-they are precious and too few. I would give my life for anyone around that table. Even so, these times together can be tricky. While some might try to avoid certain topics for fear of it being explosive, others will goad the other on until, before we know it, someone is yelling at someone. I usually need a nap afterwards.*

Does any of this sound familiar? I think while we all tend to have a Disneyesque vision of what a family is supposed to be, the truth is that, more often than not, they are not. Family tension is more the norm than we think and we shouldn’t beat ourselves up too badly when we find the ideal hard to attain.

So, I’m thinking, just out loud mind you, that, maybe, as tough as this passage is on this Sunday in August, these words might actually make more sense than usual. Maybe, with visions fresh in our minds of both the joys and challenges of

family get-togethers, we get both the appeal of peace and the stubborn elusiveness of peace.

In fact, maybe, Jesus words are not meant to be predictive as much as they are descriptive as to the way life really is.

One of the topics that can also be taboo for family gatherings is religion. “Whatever you do, don’t get Nephew Sam going on that one!” As controversial as Jesus was back then, he remains so today.

Peace on earth, the kind of peace the angels sang about on the day of Jesus’ birth, is something we all long for but here Jesus reminds us that this kind of peace does not come easily and without cost. Peace is not something one can turn on like a light switch. The road of peace is filled with sacrifice, challenge, and the giving up of so many things that would normally light up our passions like revenge, hate, retribution, selfishness, even personal safety.

“No greater love does a person have then when they are willing to lay down their lives for their friends. You are my friends.” Jesus said.

“This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.”

“Those who love their life will lose it and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.”

Let he who is without sin cast the first stone or be the first to pull a trigger or the first to point a finger or the first to turn the key on the cell door or the first to draw easy, black and white, conclusions of who the bad guys are and who the good guys are.

And the crowd was aghast when they discovered that Jesus had gone to eat lunch with Zacchaeus, one of *those* people, a Tax Collector, the worst of the worse in Jesus’ day, the one who was easy to despise, hate, and condemn. Eating lunch with the enemy? Making friends with the hated other? Showing grace at a time when the crowd around him chanted, ‘if you’re not for us then you’re against us’?

At the center of our faith, resides a cross. An instrument devised by the Romans to inflict an excruciating death upon anyone deemed to be a threat. Such executions were done fully visible to the public in order to strike fear in anyone who even entertained the thought of resisting the Roman Empire. It was upon this cross that Jesus absorbed the division his ministry caused-father against son, mother against daughter, religious elite against fishermen, Empire against peasant, condemned against the self-justified. The cross reminds us that the road to a just peace does not come easy and without great cost.

When suffrages were trying to get the vote for American women around 1917, there was a small group of women who regularly stood in front of the White House with signs protesting the lack of true democracy in America. All they did was stand

there with their signs but their presence triggered enormous rage. They were heckled, attacked, arrested, and forced to serve long periods in prison. And, I'm guessing, it's a safe bet that there was division in households – father against son, mother against daughter, mother-in-law against daughter-in-law... Peace is hard.

In 1994 Yitzhak Rabin was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for his efforts to bring peace to one of the most tension filled, war torn parts of the world-the Middle East. As Israel's Prime Minister, this followed his valiant efforts which eventually led to the signing of a peace treaty with Jordan's King Hussein and the Oslo accords with the Palestinians.

*You don't make peace with friends.* Rabin once said. *You make it with very unsavory enemies.*

*We must think differently, look at things in a different way. Peace requires a world of new concepts and new definitions.* He also said.

On November 4<sup>th</sup>, 1995 in Tel Aviv, Rabin was assassinated by a right wing extremist who opposed the Oslo accords. I remember that day vividly as well as the deep despair I felt over the significant loss of this great man who dared to seek peace in a place most resistant to it.

*Peace requires a world of new concepts and new definitions.* Rabin said and, I think, this well defines the peace Jesus' lived and advocated even as it caused households to be divided, pitting father against son and mother against daughter.

Families, as much as we love them and as much as we would do anything for them, can be tough venues to maintain peace sometimes. Families aren't the only place, though, especially when we try to live the *new concepts and new definitions* of the peace Christ calls us to. It does remain our best hope, however, even as we look forward to the day when God's Kingdom fully comes where the leaves of the trees will be for the healing of the nations and the angels will again sing, *Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace.*

To God alone be all the glory. Amen.

## Congregational Prayers and Lord's Prayer:

Leader: The Lord be with you.

**People: *And also with you.***

Leader: Let us pray...

Loving God, we give you thanks this morning for those seasons which allow us to slow down a bit to enjoy your creation in all of your creative glory. We give you thanks as well for seasons that allow us time with loved ones, near and far. We know how precious and few they are and so, when tensions arise and peace seems elusive, we are laden with sadness for the ideal that seems so hard to attain.

We ask this day that you might enable us to take your hard words to us today to heart. Use them to remind us of just how challenging peace can be, especially the peace your Son lived, advocated for, and even gave his life for.

Use them to remind us of just how human we are and, as such, how resistant we can be to the *new concepts and new definitions* of peace that your Kingdom demands.

Use them to open our hearts so that we might fully receive these new concepts and definitions with humility and hope.

We confess, O Lord, we do not do 'new' very well, especially when it threatens the status quo we have grown comfortable with. Grant us courage, we ask, grant us trust, we plead, to live the peace of your Son even when the divisions it causes hurt. We pray this because we know, in our hearts, that our children's future depends upon it.

As we pray this morning, we know there are many places in our world where peace feels very distant—we think of Syria, the Middle East, and the many places once thought to be safe which feel safe no longer. We pray for refugees and the many who suffer the ravages of our worldly conflicts. We pray for nations, communities, and families tense with conflict and broken relationships. We pray even for ourselves as we struggle to find a sense of personal peace.

Holy God, Prince of Peace, challenge us again and again to seek your peace which is hard to attain but long on hope.

Be near to those, we ask, who are ill, despondent, overwhelmed, and tired. We especially ask you to hear these prayers we now pray in our silence or aloud...

We ask this in Jesus' name who taught us to pray...

**All: *Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.***

***Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.***

*For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen.*