

“Interpreting The Present Time”

Luke 12:49-56

“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?

Interpreting The Present Time

Luke 12:49-56

August 14, 2022

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I.

Though I am glad to be back in the so-called saddle again, when I took a look at today's sermon text (which I selected *way* back at the start of the summer) I confess I had *no* idea what I was thinking in trying to preach on this passage; and in the middle of August no less. Christ has come to bring fire to the earth? To sow division rather than bring peace on earth? Divided households? Father against son? Daughter against mother? Mother-in-laws too easily entering the mix?

Though this certainly seems to sum up the current state of our hyper-polarized nation from a social and political perspective, I'm going to go out on a limb here and say that there is a little bit more to it than that. Therefore, we shall endeavor to persevere in discovering what, exactly, Jesus is talking about in challenging us to be able to interpret the present time in which we are now living.

II.

Linda and I had a wonderful but rather exhausting vacation. Lots of entertaining guests, cooking, dishes, fishing, lake activities and the like. Come Monday morning we were both happy to get back to town and return to work and our normal routines. We were happier still, on Tuesday evening, to arrive at the lake once more and avail ourselves of the opportunity to spend the late afternoon just sitting on the porch and catching up with each other.

For those who don't know, Linda is on the Board of Hospice of St. Lawrence Valley; and in that capacity, chairs their Outreach Committee. (A "shout out" to everyone who supported Linda in her "My Mile For Hospice"; she ran 4 miles, biked 11 miles and kayaked 2 miles, raising just over \$1,900.) This summer the committee has been working on a the creation of a "Croak Book"; a bit of a tongue-in-cheek DIY guide for navigating the issues which arise at the of life (complete with a frog as a symbol to soften the edges of the reality we will all face some day).

III.

The aforementioned “Croak Book” will have five Lily Pads, or chapters.

Advanced Planning: This includes Advanced Directives and Health Care Proxy so you can articulate ahead of time what kind of care you wish, or do not wish.

Legal Documents: Wills, Trusts, and the all-important Power-Of Attorney so loved ones will have the authority to handle your affairs at the point you are unable to do so yourself.

Funeral and Burial Plans: Obituary? Embalmed or cremated? Calling hours? Memorial Service? Hymns or readings? The disposition of your remains; i.e., buried in a cemetery with headstone or scattered in the ocean or from a mountain top)?

Social Media: Information regarding your various on-line accounts, and directions about what will happen to your on-line presence following your death.

Legacy and Sharing Your Values: Recipes, photos, life narrative, genealogy, legacy letters for children/grandchildren, so your descendants will know your take-away and what you hope to pass on to them.

IV.

I share all of this with you this morning, because after almost 30 years of ministry it is impossible for me to over-emphasize how important all of these things are for you and, especially, the loved ones you leave behind. However, I am also sharing this with you because in the process relating all this to me Linda included a rather small aside which I found fascinating: that is, literacy level.

Each of the 5 board members of the Outreach Committee was paired with a staff member and to each of these “teams” was assigned one of the 5 chapters in the Croak Book. Having done so, the task is now to combine the various writing styles so the book reads as if coming from one voice. More importantly, though, they want the book to be *readable* to the general public. Which gets to the issue of literacy and reading level. Amazingly, there are actually computer programs which will analyze text to determine what literacy level is required in order to read and understand is being written. Who knew?

V.

As one who writes for a living, this *fascinated* me. Linda told me that for the purposes of the book, they were looking to write text which, essentially, would be at a 5th grade literacy or reading level. Curious, I went on-line and found one of these programs which would analyze the literacy level of any text you provided. So, to give you an example, I copied and pasted in the first two pages of today's sermon and was told that it is written at a 10th grade literacy level. Then, I went back to a few sermons from July and determined that in general, my sermons range anywhere from an upper high school to an early college literacy level.

By way of comparison, here is an example of writing at a 5th grade literacy level:

Mount Rushmore is a national monument located in the Black Hills of South Dakota. Carved into the side of the large mountain are the faces of four men who were United States presidents. These men were chosen because all four played important roles in American history. The four faces carved onto Mount Rushmore are those of George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln and Theodore Roosevelt. Each face carved into the mountain is about 60 feet tall.

VI.

As you may now be able to see, the idea of literacy level dovetails nicely with the rather challenging scripture passage we have before us this morning. Jesus talks about interpreting, or reading, the present time so that we can understand what is happening all around us and, more to the point, what the future will bring; which, by way of analogy, what we might understand as requiring a certain level of *spirituality* literacy in order to fully comprehend.

Though I think there may be increasingly higher levels of spiritual literacy, perhaps akin to advancing grade levels, the most important differentiation which need to get made is the first one, and the most basic: spiritual literacy verses spiritual illiteracy. It is here, I believe, that Jesus' words about bringing fire and division to the earth rather than peace begin to take root. Either you have a sense, an understanding, a faith about what's going on in the big picture, or you don't; either you are dealing with reality, or your aren't.

VII.

In order to flush this out a little bit let's return to the Croak Book. From what I understand in speaking with Linda, the intention is to create a kind of technical manual about how and what to do in order to prepare for and navigate the end of life, and to help those you love move beyond your death. However, all this is predicated on accepting the *reality* of one's death.

Now, we all know we are *going* to die...*some* day, but most days we really don't give it much thought, do we? And there are certainly any number of distractions and excuses in life which keep us from thinking about our death in any kind of consistent or meaningful way. Imagine, though, if we did? Well, from a technical perspective, I can say with certainty we would save a lot of time, money, hassle and heartache if we would do even a little bit of thinking and planning about our own inevitable demise; which is the whole purpose of the Croak Book.

VIII.

That is the very least of it, however. The real value in embracing the reality of one's death is the benefit it brings to the reality of one's daily life; beginning with *this* day, and stretching forward to that inevitable *last* day. Shockingly, or perhaps not, such a level of spiritual literacy, akin to a 5th grade reading level, is simply not at work in the world. Here, then, is where those divisions which Jesus talks about begin to form. Though many church folks may take comfort in reading today's scripture passage and imagining some apocalyptic, end of the world event where God does all the heavy lifting and they, themselves, come out on the right end of the stick (of course) I don't think Jesus was talking about interpreting such a future. Instead, Jesus was talking about interpreting the *present*, the here and now, what is *already* taking place and what has *always* been taking place.

IX.

As we see in other parts of the Bible, the purpose of the fire about which Jesus speaks isn't one of wrath or punishment. Instead, this fire serves to separate the wheat from the chaff (if you will); about revealing what is real and what is imaginary, about what is valuable and what insignificant, about what is true and what is false. In I Corinthians 3:9-16, the Apostle Paul speaks directly to the purpose of such fire:

“According to the grace of God, our foundation has been laid. Let each person take care how he builds upon it. For no other foundation can any one lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. Now if any one builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones wood, hay or straw — each person’s work will be come manifest; for the Day will disclose it, for it will be revealed with fire, and the fire test what sort of work each one has done.”

X.

Death is a clarifying moment; THE clarifying moment of one’s life. However, this doesn’t mean such a clarity waits in abeyance until one’s end; it is always present and available along the journey of our days to those who possess and practice enough spiritual literacy for interpreting the present time. Such a spiritual literacy arises not from one’s mind or intellect, but from one’s heart and from one’s soul. Though there will surely be some epic future reckoning for the world and all that live in it, some far off conflagration or inferno, it is the smolder and slow burn happening right here under our feet, in the present, that should most concern us. Be forewarned though, possessing and utilizing such a degree of spiritual literacy in order to accept the reality of one’s death becomes something of a slippery slope when it comes to living one’s life.

XI.

If, like the writer of Ecclesiastes, we have seen everything that is done under the sun, and behold that all is vanity and a striving after wind, what possible purpose and meaning is there to be found in this life? Do we fool ourselves, numb ourselves, distract ourselves or simply busy ourselves just enough to move from day to day and try hard to not think too much about it? Do we simply join in the rat race, wander aimlessly in a maze of our own making and keep spinning the hamster wheel until it all comes to a screeching halt as the world comes crashing down around us? Do we take up sides, or even arms, as we further divide ourselves one from another, in a desperate attempt to control our fears and avoid our own culpability by desperately trying to control a narrative we know in our hearts to be false? Do we fail to interpret the present time, as obvious and apparent as it is?

XII.

Or, do we opt for the alternative, and it is the *only* alternative? Are we brave enough to take a deep breath, reach out a hand to those around us,

understand ourselves to bound to each other and to planet which we share? Are we wise enough to understand any meaning and purpose in this life is ours solely by virtue of what God allows and what we endeavor to create for ourselves? Are we spiritually literate enough to recognize the acceptance of death isn't the end of life, but the necessary beginning of a life being truly lived to its fullest? Are we filled with enough faith to forge ahead into an uncertain future without pretending we have all the answers; not only for ourselves, but for everyone else? And, are we honest enough in interpreting the present time? We had better be, because it is the only time we have left, and there is less and less of it every day. Amen.