

Sermon

The Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost

Proper 15, Year C

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by the Rev. Norman Bray

“I came to bring fire to the earth”. This Jesus that we hear from in today’s gospel does not sound like the “Prince of Peace” or the “lamb of God”. The words that we heard today sound much more like an agitator, a revolutionary, trying to incite the crowds to action, trying to stir up the people, and that is really what Jesus is doing. Jesus is a revolutionary character but in a way that is different from most rebels. Jesus is working to bring about, to bring into being, the Kingdom of God right here on earth, but the earth already has many kingdoms, many kings and powerful rulers who will not appreciate having their apple carts upset. The powers and principalities have had a pretty firm grip on human beings for a long time and they will not willingly relinquish their powers and so the Church must interpret the signs of the times in order to understand how we are to continue the work that Jesus Christ began.

Jesus knew that He would not complete the task, not in his human lifetime, but He took great care to show us how this has to work and today he tells us that this struggle will change from age to age. “Luke 12:56 You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present time?” It is important that the Church be able to interpret the signs of the times in order to be able to respond in the most effective, most loving, most subversive way. Does it make you uncomfortable to hear me say to you that we must respond in a subversive way? If we respond to the Gospel’s by doing the things that Jesus told us to do then we are automatically subversive, we are working toward the overthrow of governments and systems, of powers and principalities who separate us into rich and poor, black

and white or Hispanic, into those who have everything that they need to live a life that is free of worry about where you might sleep tonight, what will you eat tomorrow, can you find some close that are not too ragged for your child to wear to school and not be embarrassed? Jesus called us specifically to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, take care of widows and orphans, visit the prisoners, to love our neighbor as ourselves and accomplishing these tasks is just as revolutionary today as it was in ancient Palestine. The Church's response to the call of the Gospel has changed as the world has changed and today we can point to the Millennium Development Goals as a result of reading the signs of the times and providing a response that is appropriate to the challenge. The Millennium Development Goals are a United Nations initiative that was implemented in the year 2000 that intend to accomplish eight goals by the year 2015. The goals are:

- Goal 1: Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger
- Goal 2: Achieve universal primary education
- Goal 3: Promote gender equality and empower women
- Goal 4: Reduce child mortality
- Goal 5: Improve maternal health
- Goal 6: Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases
- Goal 7: Ensure environmental sustainability
- Goal 8: Develop a Global Partnership for Development

You might ask, "How is that subversive?" That sounds like the United Nations is doing what the Church should be doing, doesn't it, how could that be subversive? I call it subversive because this is an excellent example of what Jesus talks about in today's Gospel reading. This is an example of the Church understanding how governments work and then devising an approach to these

problems that allows the governments to feel like they are completely responsible for solving big social problems when in reality the idea and the initial energy for this campaign came from the Church, that's Church with a big C, Christians all, over the world working to feed the poor, clothe the naked, take care of widows and orphans, visit the prisoners. We have at least once now learned how to read the signs of the times and we have crafted an approach to the problems that encourages the powers and principalities to participate in the cure. Does this mean that all of these problems are solved? Not yet, but there has been substantial progress made. Does this mean that we may be close to bringing about the Kingdom of God here on earth? No, God will do that when God wills it but it is our task to continue to work to bring it about. Does this mean that the powers and principalities that attempt to order our lives and maintain a system that oppresses the poor and protects the rich, does this partial success mean an end to this system? Not a chance, not until Jesus comes again will we ever completely escape those.

How does this subversion, this rebellion against the systems fit together with the other piece of today's Gospel? You remember, the part that makes you very uncomfortable to read it; **Luke 12:51-53** Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division! ⁵² From now on five in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three; ⁵³ 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." I think that this division is between those who are willing to lead the revolutionary and subversive Christian life and those who are not willing to take that risk. It is still a risk, you know. They killed Jesus because he was a threat to the authorities of his times, not a military threat but a threat to upset the whole system so that those who enjoyed positions of wealth and privilege would be people, just ordinary people, living ordinary lives. It is a terrible strain when that happens to a person,

when someone changes from rich and powerful to ordinary and so the system works to prevent that and those people that are part of that system are against those who want to see all of the hungry fed, all of the naked clothed, all of the children with an education, all persons empowered to be what they choose to be, all nations free and able to develop so that its people might prosper. This is the fire that Jesus brought to earth, the passion to live into the Gospel fully and one day accomplish the Millennium Development Goals and then move beyond that to a place that I cannot imagine yet but I know that some of you will. That passion, that fire that Jesus brought to earth has been passed on to us as the Holy Spirit working in each one of us to do the work that God has given us to do. So now I want us to all be filled with that Holy Spirit and work to accomplish the Millennium Development Goals and even though we know that there are people that work against us, powers and principalities that do not share our goals we know that we carry within ourselves that fire that Jesus brought to earth. Let us now carry that fire into the world. Amen