

Year C: Proper 15a Is 5:1-7; Ps 80:1-2, 8-18; Heb 11:29-12:2; Lk 12:49-56
St. Barnabas, Florissant – August 18, 2019

Focus Sentence: Why is “division” necessary for the growth/progress of the church?

I offer these thoughts in the name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Well, my sisters and brothers, it seems that once again our Sunday Scripture readings sound more appropriate for Advent or for Lent than for the balmy days of post-Pentecost summertime. Once again, we have a prophetic voice (this time, that of Isaiah) warning us in thundering words about our behavior: “What more was there to do for my vineyard that I have not done in it? When I expected it to yield grapes, why did it yield wild grapes? ...[I] expected justice, but saw bloodshed; righteousness, but heard a cry!”

Through the words of Isaiah, God goes on to describe what God will do to this vineyard run amok: “I will remove its hedge and it shall be devoured; I will break down its wall, and it shall be trampled down. I will make it a waste; it shall not be pruned or hoed, and it shall be overgrown with briars and thorns.”

Those were not pleasant words that were directed at the kingdoms of Israel in Isaiah’s time, and (if we’re honest and take to heart that message, “I expected justice, but saw bloodshed; righteousness, but heard a cry!”) those same words could well be directed at us and our leaders today. Justice and righteousness should be the order of the day, but (as just one example) our news media continue daily to remind us of the real cries of hurting people, struggling with hunger, addiction, injustice, and many other maladies. Indeed, when God comes to consider the produce of our vineyard in our day, why does God *still* find so many wild and sour grapes?

PAUSE

But that’s OK. We can surely keep on ignoring those crazy Old-Testament rantings; that was then, and this is now, as they say. In fact, we can always turn to the New Testament, and to Jesus’ words of comfort and peace and love. Right?

Well, no, unfortunately, that's definitely not the case this morning. Our gentle Jesus, meek and mild, the Prince of Peace, *what's* he saying this morning? "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 to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division! ... five in one household will be divided, ... father against son, ...mother against daughter, ...mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law."

And we can yet again turn to the day's news reports. Whether it be in the halls of Congress, or in our own community, there certainly is division, and father is literally divided against son, mother against daughter. And we shudder to hear those other words of Jesus, "You hypocrites!", when we consider how we ever let things get so bad in the first place.

.....Well, thanks, Jesus for those words of comfort this morning!

PAUSE

I'm sure you'll hear me say this more than once, but my favorite Christian writer, Frederick Buechner, likes to say, "The Gospel is bad news before it is good news." (*Telling the Truth*, p. 7) Bad news, because we don't want fire or division in our lives. We want peace on this earth. And our own *Book of Common Prayer* reminds us, in the Catechism on p. 855, that the ministry entrusted to us at baptism is to "carry on Christ's work of reconciliation in the world." Reconciliation sure doesn't sound like fire or division should be involved.

PAUSE

OK, then, let's take a different look at these harsh words of Jesus this morning, and just what they might actually mean in the carrying out of this ministry of reconciliation. Reconciliation is really about relationships, isn't it? Restoring to wholeness relationships that have been broken for various reasons, isn't it? Reconciliation is the healing of those divisions Jesus is talking about, right?

PAUSE

Interestingly though, if you think about the dynamics of the church, don't you find a recurring pattern? The church brings different kinds of broken people together, reconciling them to God and to each other. We could go all the way back to Jesus sitting down at dinner with tax collectors and prostitutes and other so-called sinners. Lots of reconciling going on at those dinners. But what was going on at the very same time? Division! The scribes, the Pharisees, and other good religious folk becoming divided and arguing about the scandal of Jesus eating with those no-goods.

PAUSE

And I guess that, unfortunately, it's always been like that. One group of people is reconciled with one another, they come together for mutual support, get comfortable in their "reconciled" situation, and then they're upset when some new group of outsiders comes along looking for reconciliation and relationship within the church.

PAUSE

Today, it's not Pharisees and tax collectors, but rather the "good" church folks and maybe, on the other side, the gay community, for example. Reconciliation and healing are followed later by still more (and different) division. I remember that, when the Supreme Court ruled to legalize same-sex marriage, a decision was made to ring the bells downtown at Christ Church Cathedral. One group of folks down there felt reconciled and healed, while a different group within the congregation felt betrayed and divided.

PAUSE

There's always risk involved in reaching out to any group of outsiders and inviting them to join the "insiders." And sometimes that risk results in division among the current members of the congregation. That risk, though, is what Jesus seems to be always urging us to undertake, and (today) Jesus reminds us that the ensuing division is precisely what might result. And just maybe we aren't doing things "right" when there isn't some (healthy) division.

PAUSE

These days, our St. Barnabas congregation, and (really) the entire Christian community, are entering into discernment discussions to figure out how to be the church in new and different ways. Jesus is pushing us to take risks and to let go of our past ideas about being church. Might there be divisions because of this? I think that Jesus' words this morning assure us that divisions are not only normal, but maybe are meant to occur, because Jesus continues to keep pushing us out of our comfort zone. If that's the case, and we're willing to trust Jesus' lead, and the guidance of the Holy Spirit, then we have absolutely nothing to fear.

AMEN