

Sermons at First Church

A Ministry of the Word
August 14, 2022

First Presbyterian Church
Clarksburg, WV

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Luke 12:49-56

Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division!
(Luke 12:51 N.R.S.V.)

Popularity verses Faith

What does it take to be popular? Back around 300 B.C. there was a comedian named, Philemon who routinely beat out his competitors at the comedy competitions. He was very popular. What was his secret? He paid certain audience members to laugh loudly at his jokes. It worked.

It turns out that Shakespeare did that too. He paid selected audience members to laugh, jeer, or weep at the appropriate times during his plays. Today, TV shows routinely use a recording of an audience laughing to let us know when during the show we should laugh. TV shows use a laugh track because it makes them more popular.

What does it take to be popular? Many school kids think it is a matter of wearing the right clothes; hanging out with the in crowd; or being a star athlete. It is scary what our children are sometimes willing to do to be popular.

What does it take to be popular? Politicians know that if they want to be popular, they have to tell people what they want to hear. Promising to lower taxes is always a big hit. So is eliminating government waste. Politicians have even been known to lie in order to get elected. I know, that is a shocker!

Jesus' words in our text for today are also a bit of a shock. Jesus has been very popular. He fed the 5,000 from just a few loaves and fish. People really ate that up. (Pardon the pun). Jesus healed some people. That was also great. Huge crowds had started following him around. He was becoming very popular. But then he says this: "I come 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!"

Scripture does not tell us this, but I can imagine good, old Peter pulling Jesus aside. "Boss, as your campaign manger, I gotta tell you, you are blowing it here. Listen, people have enough stress and conflict in their lives. They come to you for peace and comfort. And many people are poor and needy. They come to you for a better life. We were ahead in the poles, and now you done gone and ruint it. We can fix this boos, but you got to cool it with this talk of fire and division."

Whether or not Peter talked him, Jesus does not stop his wild talk. He doesn't care about popularity, he cares about God's truth. His goal is not to make life easier, but rather to make life meaningful and glorious. His goal is kingdom living - not shallow popularity.

We are used to thinking about Jesus as the Prince of Peace and the Great Physician. Indeed those are appropriate titles for him. Yet there is more to Jesus and faith than that. There are times when following Jesus brings us great comfort. But there are other times when following him brings us discomfort and stress.

Let's look at how this talk of division plays out in life. Following Jesus creates division between who we were and who we will become under Christ. Popular Christianity says things like, "Jesus will help you live your best life." While there is some truth in that, it is also a distortion of the gospel.

A lot of people come to Jesus wanting a little bit of cosmetic surgery to their life. What Jesus offers is a heart transplant. Jesus talks about a baptism of fire. He talks about burning down the old life and starting over with a new life.

No one knows this better than the Apostle Paul. He was a popular, young, Jewish leader. He was an up and rising pharisee. He was also a persecutor of Christians. But after his conversion on the Damascus Road, he burned that old life forever. He started out at the bottom again as a follower of Christ.

For those of us who were raised in the church, who have never known a time when we didn't know Christ, the division may not seem so sharp. It is still there, however. From time to time each of us becomes aware that what we want is not what God wants.

One of my church members in another church told me about going to work for a car dealership. He was a young man with a family and he was looking for a secure job that would support his family. Things went well for awhile, but then he was offered a promotion to become head of the parts department. He accepted the job. It wasn't too long before he discovered that the parts department manager before him had been selling used parts and claiming they were new parts.

My friend went to the head of the car dealership and told him what he had found. He said this is not right. I am not going to cheat people like that. The owner said, "I understand. It is your parts department. You run it however you like. But just be aware, if your department loses money, you are out of a job."

What my friend wanted was a secure job. What God wanted was honest dealing. In this case, my friend managed the department honestly and was still able to show a profit. But there was no guarantee that would happen.

Sometimes following Jesus causes divisions within families. Most of us have enough stress and

strains going on in our families without our faith causing more divisions, but sometimes that is what happens.

Dynamic Preaching magazine this month had a story about a man named Franklin McCallie. Franklin was raised in a prominent, wealthy family in Chattanooga, TN. He grew up in the 40's and 50's in a family that were staunch supporters of segregation. The only contact he had with black people were with the staff that worked for his family. Franklin just assumed that the way things were, was the way they should be.

Then during college he was invited to take part in a small gathering between white and black students from separate colleges. He went. He listened as these young people told stories of their personal experiences with discrimination and racism. Franklin started to question his family's acceptance of inequality and racism.

When Franklin went back home and tried to talk to his family about his new found questions, it caused a blow up in the family. His uncle accused him of being an embarrassment to the family name.

When Franklin graduated from college with a teaching degree, he was offered a position with the McCallie private school. It was after all named after his family and he was expected to continue with the tradition. Franklin, however, refused because he insisted that the school needed to be integrated. His father, as head of the school, refused to even consider it.

So Franklin took a position with the all Black Howard School. From there he was a tireless advocate for integration and racial justice. Occasionally his father would call him, mostly to criticize him for his activism. Didn't he know that he was ruining his reputation?

One day Franklin learned that the local Kiwanis Club had accepted their first Black member. Franklin went to the president of the club, a family friend, to thank him. He also wanted to know how it was that this group of all white men had been persuaded to accept a black member as a brother. "Don't you know?" asked the president, "it was your father who persuaded us."

This story has a happy ending. Franklin and his father were reconciled. The McCallie school became integrated and soon all of the private schools in Tennessee followed their example.

That story has a happy ending and we thank God for that. However, that is not always the case. We are sometimes called to make a decision. Who do we love more, family and friends, or Jesus Christ?

Today's text is challenging because it reminds us that following Jesus is about being faithful. It is not about being popular. There is a division here between the values of Christ and the values of the world.

In our society, bigger and more are often used interchangeably with success. Even in the church we can see that. Churches with larger memberships and more money are seen as more successful. Yet, that is not the standard that Christ uses.

I was reading about one pastor of a larger church. (Dynamic Preaching, August, 2022 pg. 74) His name is Rev. Brian Zahnd. Rev. Zahnd was seen as somewhat of a Christian celebrity by his fellow pastors and community because he pastored a dynamic and growing church. Yet, as the church grew in numbers, Rev. Zahnd began to question the spiritual health of its members. Through prayer and Bible Study this problem became more and more evident to the pastor. So he preached a series of sermons on Jesus' sermon on the mount. Zahnd talked about the blessing of Jesus on the poor, those who mourn, and those who are persecuted.

The leaders of the church responded. They began to urge the members to align their lives more closely with the life of Christ. They challenged people to live sacrificially. That was not a popular message. People began to leave the church.

It seemed that many people just wanted an inspiring message, a lively pick-me-up, maybe some small group time around a coffee bar. They certainly did not want to change their lifestyle and priorities to do the work of Christ.

Jesus uses some hard language in our text because he knows how hard it is for us to change our lifestyles, to break with the value systems that have defined us in the past. I want you to note, however, that Jesus lived what he preached.

At the moment he was preaching this sermon, he was still very popular with the people. Yet, he knew that this would not last. He knew that in order to be faithful to God, he would have to endure the shame and pain of the cross. He knew all this. And yet, he was faithful. He willingly went to the cross for us.

The question before us is this: Are we willing to follow Christ all the way to the cross?

Amen.