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August 18 2019

**Twentieth Sunday in Ordinary
Time Year C**

**Tenth Sunday after Pentecost
(Proper 15)**



Lectionary citations:

Isaiah 5:1-7 with *Psalms* 80:1-2,
8-19

Jeremiah 23:23-29 with *Psalms* 82
Hebrews 11:29-12:2

Luke 12:49-56

**A Prayer for Reconciliation
by Pdraig O Tuama**

Where there is separation, there is pain.

And where there is pain, there is a story.

And where there is a story, there is understanding, and misunderstanding, listening and not listening.

May we – separated people, estranged strangers, unfriended families, divided communities – turn toward each other, and turn toward our stories, with understanding and listening, with argument and acceptance, with challenge, change and consolation.

Because if God is to be found, God will be found in the space between.
Amen.

Transforming any division can only be done by human encounter. It's a call to action we're reminded of each week with a string of words we say to each other here in both sincerity and banter. We work and strive to end the division that exists internally, interpersonally, between

and within families and communities, among nations, among all forms of clusters of people. Our world is rife with division. We don't need any more of it. The text for this week, however, speaks of division; not one that is transformed, but one that is brought. Jesus' words are clear, blunt, and, for many and for me, disturbing. He has not come to bring peace, but rather division. This division comes within a litany of other actions – work Jesus is here to do – and also anxiety: the stress that bears down until the work is completed and a wish that the work were already done. Jesus' anxiety rises with the prospect of the work to be done; mine rises with the work itself (can't we find another way?). I invite you to enter with me into this anxiety; to sit enmeshed in confusion; to allow these words that bring division to stir our complacency; to hear "You hypocrites" and to hear it personally; to find solace; and perhaps, to find transformation. This week's text follows Jesus along his journey en route to Jerusalem. As the crowds gather to listen, his message is one of discipleship spoken with urgency. Jesus has come to bring fire and there is a baptism he must undergo. Like conflict and peace, fire and baptism can be understood by their traditional connotations; fire associated with death and destruction, baptism with renewal and regeneration. However, if we continue to uncover the meaning of these words, we might be reminded of a natural forest fire, one that burns away the dead wood and restores nutrients into the soil allowing a new forest to be birthed anew. Baptism may be thought of as a process of immersing, cleansing, removing what once was and inviting the spirit to enter within. Like the interplay between peace and conflict, we might notice fire and baptism in more fluid terms. Let's bring this approach to Jesus' next words. While I am quick to recall

the many times peace is offered, encouraged, and delighted in throughout the gospels – "go in peace" (Luke 7:50), "peace to this house" (Luke 10:5), "peace be with you" (John 20:19–26), "blessed are the peacemakers" (Matthew 5:9) – this text, specifically Luke 12:51, "Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division!" is startling, confusing, even distressing. The text is quite plain with its language of division. The family will be divided in a myriad of ways: by count (two against three, three against two), across generations (son/daughter against father/mother), and extending out past the nuclear unit (mother-in-law against daughter-in-law). This set of verses is unrelenting in its promise of division, one after another after another. And this understanding of division is strictly presented in opposition to peace. What, then, does it mean to divide? And in this division, what pits us against each other? What purpose does this division serve? How too might we hold the tension, confusion, paradox of both the peace and division that Jesus promises? Whatever the answers may be – and these answers are important, that we explore them in our own context – the division is painful. Especially within a family. In conflict, particularly conflict that is divisive, there may follow misunderstanding, fear, estrangement, and resentment. There is great loss when division, by necessity or choice, occurs. Earlier in Luke's gospel, we learn about people who want to be followers of Jesus: one asks to first bury his father and the other asks to first say farewell to those at home (Luke 9:59–62). Each of these requests, to tend to the family first before the task of discipleship, is met with rebuke. Later in Luke, we hear Jesus further define the cost of discipleship: "Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers

and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple” (Luke 14:26). Discipleship is immediate and urgent. Discipleship does not wait. Discipleship requires division, requires that we leave behind what was. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, reflecting on Luke 9, explains that discipleship understood on our terms makes it out to be something “humanly reasonable and comprehensible [...] It becomes a human program, which I can organize according to my own judgment and can justify rationally and ethically.” But true discipleship “separates the followers from their previous experience. A call to discipleship thus immediately creates a new situation. Staying in the old situation and following Christ mutually exclude each other.” This sort of change is demanding. It is fundamentally upending. It stirs our complacency with our lives lived as they are. For we who resist the call, resist discipleship, Jesus says “You hypocrites!” He likens the signs of the times, the work of his ministry to a cloud rising in the west and a south wind blowing – obvious signals for rain and scorching heat, respectively. To the crowds who have watched, listened, and learned, who have been challenged with a message of earthly poverty as a path to abundance in heaven (Luke 12:33), who in these verses are told there will be division, Jesus is again plain in his language. It is hypocrisy to experience, bear witness to, be immersed in the presence of Jesus and claim any misunderstanding or confusion of what is to come and what needs to be done. Between the promise of the division and the condemnation of hypocrisy, there may be pain and anger, fear and anxiety. May we find the space within to experience our emotional reaction and sit with our troubled thoughts. May we find solace in the humanity and divinity of Jesus and in the transformational power of the gospels.

The Civil Rights Trail. The trail walk includes Kelly Ingram Park, the site of some of the most vicious confrontations over civil rights in Birmingham. Truly, a place where heat cracked open the door for grace.

The park is encircled by sculptures memorializing the violence, including fire hoses pointed at the crowds of protestors and cement walls you walk between that have three-dimensional police dogs lunging out on all sides.

Of all the powerful installations, perhaps the most visceral is “The Four Spirits.” It depicts four little girls around a park bench preparing for worship at the 16th Street Baptist Church. On September 15, 1963, a bomb planted by the KKK exploded under the front steps of the church, killing those four little girls: Addie Mae Collins, Denise McNair, Carole Robertson, and Cynthia Wesley.

The deaths of those tiny civil rights warriors spurred an international outrage that marked a turning point in the Civil Rights Movement and fueled support for the Civil Rights Act of 1964. In fact, the tombstone for Addie Mae Collins reads: “She died so freedom might live.”

I walked to the church located across the street from the park, and there I discovered a huge stained-glass window on the back wall near where the bomb exploded. It glimmered in the sun, a black crucified Christ in its center.

A member of the church pointed out that the right hand of the Christ is flexed to represent the pushing away of hatred and injustice, while the left hand is outstretched, palm open, offering forgiveness. Under the image are the words “You do it to me,” based on Matthew 25:40: “What you do to the least of these, you do it to me.”

She then explained the window’s remarkable history. As the news of the bombing spread worldwide, John Petts, an artist in a tiny coastal village in Wales, heard about the tragedy and offered to create a window to replace the destroyed back wall of the church.

Rather than have a few wealthy individuals fund the project, donations were capped at half a crown (around 15 cents in current value) so that the window would be a gift from the people. All over Wales, people lined up to give. School children brought pocket money to donate. That tiny nation, more than six times smaller than Alabama, pulled together and created that window to help rebuild the church.

Sometimes it takes heat to bring the grace.

Here we are, fifty years of heat later, and the grace of true civil rights still hasn’t come. Violence is still aimed at our brothers and sisters of color. Racist hearts are still hardened against them. Equality is still held far from their reach.

If you get there, go to Eugene’s for dinner, to experience solace and grace. Pause to pray for a larger grace, a grace for which Addie Mae Collins, Denise McNair, Carole Robertson, and Cynthia Wesley made the ultimate sacrifice. A grace that was and is the legacy of the crucified Christ. A grace that will come only if all of us—side by side, hand in hand—face the heat together. For it is then that we the people will bring the ultimate grace of freedom.