

10th Sunday after Pentecost – August 14, 2022
Luke 12:49-56

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Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

As most of you know, I spent most of this past week in Columbus, Ohio attending the triennial Churchwide Assembly of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, our national church body. It was the fourth time I have attended a churchwide assembly, but only the first time I participated as a voting member. And as it happens, my first time was the very first assembly, the constituting convention of the ELCA, also held in Columbus, in the same convention center, 35 years ago. There were more than 800 of us voting members in attendance, and lots of others, including churchwide staff members, visitors, and volunteers. In fact, one of my former pastor colleagues from Southern Illinois who now serves a church in Ohio was there working as a volunteer. It was great to catch up. So lots of people, which took lots of work to organize and make happen. We had a worship service every day with around a thousand in attendance, which was remarkable. Also remarkable is that the worship was quite diverse, with music from many different traditions. The service on Wednesday was led by Native American members of our church, who bore witness to the long struggle of their peoples over the past 500 years. We were challenged to remember that the land we were gathering on, as well as the land we each call home, once belonged to others from whom it was taken. None of us were alive when that happened, but the consequences remain. Those who survived the colonization and resettling of their lands were pushed into reservations on less productive land, where poverty and other injustices have been the rule for many of them ever since, including a disturbing trend in the assault and murder of their women.

Ever since the founding of the ELCA 35 years ago, we have been intentional about trying to diversify our church. If we are to go by numbers, then that effort has largely been a failure. We remain to day one of the most ethnically homogeneous denominations in the country, meaning mostly white. But we are still trying. Two of the twelve voting members sent from our synod were African Americans. That's roughly 17% of our contingent, even though our synod's demographics are nowhere near 17% African American. We are still trying. We continue to see value in diversifying our membership, and that is why there were disproportionate numbers of people of color at this assembly of a mostly white church. It's why the top three candidates for vice president of the ELCA were people of color, and the man who was elected is named Imran Siddiqui.

Our valuing of diversity comes from recognizing that Jesus sent his disciples to all nations. "All ethnic groups" is probably a better translation. And that comes with challenges. It means taking other people and their stories and histories seriously. It means seeing them as fellow human beings, equally valued and loved by God. Now that seems obvious and easy to talk about in the abstract. But it is less comfortable when things start getting specific. I remember getting a phone call in my first year here at Grace because our sign message that week said something about God loving the poor. This person was upset because she wasn't poor, and felt excluded, as if we were saying that God loves *only* the poor and not her. And let's not even get started on how triggered some of us white people can get when someone dares to tell us that "black lives matter." Valuing diversity is a challenge for us because it means acknowledging that race, for example, is a thing to be concerned about, that we have used it to privilege some over others, that that has caused disproportionate and enduring harm, and that it is not an easy habit to break.

So our valuing of diversity was noticeable at this churchwide assembly. But also noticeable was the frustration and impatience of many younger people at the assembly, young

pastors and young lay people alike, at our inability to move the needle on being a more inclusive and diverse church body. They were behind proposals that we voted on to rethink how our denomination is organized and how we apportion and use our resources. Most of those proposals passed, so we'll see what kind of change might come out of such rethinking, whether we actually do make changes or continue with the status quo.

There is, believe it or not, a tie-in to our readings this morning. Jesus wouldn't qualify as a young adult in the ELCA since he was over thirty by the time he began his active ministry, but his impatience and frustration are on full display in our Gospel reading this morning. If it didn't make you just a little uncomfortable, maybe you weren't listening closely enough. It happens. I've just been through five straight days of worship services, and as wonderful as that was, I will admit that I was not fully engaged 100% of the time. Jesus had come to make a change in the world. He is quite literally on a mission from God, and he is eager to see that mission fulfilled. "I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled!" he says. You need to know that Jesus is using an expression here that literally means to light an earthen oven, but it figuratively means to "set the wheels in motion," or to "get this party started." So he's not talking about "burning it all down," to use another of our figurative expressions. But he is talking about seeing some results from his efforts, about making real and meaningful change. And to do that, he targets one of our most cherished institutions, the family.

That's tough on me, and maybe you too. I am a family man. I love my family, and would do anything for them. I also, on my good days, love my neighbors, in a general sort of way that sometimes gets specific. For instance, I just installed my next-door neighbor's storm door because she needed it done and I had the time and minimal skill set needed to help her. That was me loving my neighbor in a very minimal way. But would I do anything for her? No, if I'm honest. I wouldn't. There would be a limit somewhere. Now there might be a limit somewhere with my family too, but it would be a *very* different limit. I suspect that this is true for most of you too. And therein lies the problem for Jesus. Our privileging of our families over others, like our instinctive privileging of those who are like us over those who aren't, and our presumption that that is the way the world ought to work, leads to the suffering of those with broken families, or no families at all. This is why widows and orphans are so consistently a focus of concern throughout the Bible. This does not mean that families are bad. Far from it! Families are a gift and blessing from God, as Martin Luther emphasizes in his Small Catechism. But God's blessings are not meant to be hoarded, or to be idolized. And when our focus on the family, (to coin a phrase) makes us lose sight of our neighbors in need, then that becomes a problem, both for our relationship with them, and for our relationship with God.

The good news in the face of this shocking bad news is that Jesus is working in us to restore and repair those relationships, with God and with one another. Jesus' love for the world is so deep that he would indeed do anything to save us from our deadly allegiances to the way the world works and to free us to love as God loves, as our brief order of confession and forgiveness declared to us earlier. He would even die for us in order to break the grip of sin, death, and evil on our lives, and would rise again from the dead to rule the world in love. This is the good news that centers and animates our life as a local congregation here in the middle of the country, and as a national denomination and a part of the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church on earth. May that good news, by God's grace and by the power of the Holy Spirit, take hold of our hearts and move us to open our hearts and our lives to God and the world around us. And may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and our minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.