Invitation to the Table

In the 1960s, A Harvard graduate student traveled beyond the Arctic Circle and lived with the Inuit people in the tundra for 17 months. No roads. No heating systems. No grocery stores. Winters dropped below –40°.

She was intrigued to learn that the adults never lost their temper.

One day, someone spilled a boiling kettle inside an igloo, damaging the ice floor. No shouting. No blame. Just a calm, "Too bad," before fetching more water. Another time, a fishing line — painstakingly woven for days — snapped on the very first cast. The only response? "Let's make another one." She wondered how Inuit people learned and embraced this emotional mastery?

One afternoon, she found her answer. A young mother was playing with her angry two-year-old son. She handed him a small stone and said, "Hit me with it. Again. Harder." When he threw it, she covered her eyes and pretended to cry: "Ooooh, that hurts!"

It seemed bizarre; but it comprised a powerful lesson. This young Inuit mother took the anger into herself; no retaliation, no punishment, and modeled non-retaliation.

The Inuit people and most indigenous North American spiritualities are closer to living out God's intentions than are the European spiritualities that spawned Western Christianity. On the cross Jesus took our anger and our obsession with retaliation into himself, and we can choose, if we will, to leave those instruments of death on this table with him.

Our hymn of Communion is #414, "Eat This Bread."

Pastoral Prayer

- The children will be facing you during the “Blessing of the Packpacks,” and that means they will be facing the video cameras.
- The “Blessing of the Backpacks” will be the Kids’ Moment.
- Checki-in day at UCA
- Kelly

God of Wisdom and Truth, we thank you for the gift of learning, and at the beginning of a new school year, we ask for your protection over all students, teachers, and staff. Guide them through this year with wisdom and grace. May this be a year of growth, discovery, and positive experiences for everyone.

We acknowledge the dedication of our teachers. Bless them with patience, wisdom, and a passion for their profession. Guide them as they shape young minds and inspire a love of learning. Protect them from stress and grant them strength and peace throughout the school year.

Bless our parents as they support the educational process. Help us all to work together to create a community in which everyone feels valued and supported. We ask for your guidance and blessings on all who learn and teach, be it in college or university, public or private schools, and even within these walls.

This we pray in the name of the one who was called, “Teacher.” Amen.

LUKE 12:49-56 (NRSVUE) *"I have come to cast fire upon the earth, and how I wish it were already ablaze!* [50]*I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what constraint I am under until it is completed!* [51]*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."

[54]*He also said to the crowds, "When you see a cloud rising in the west, you immediately say, 'It is going to rain,' and so it happens.* [55]*And when you see the south wind blowing, you say, 'There will be scorching heat,' and it happens.* [56]*You hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present time?*

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The Word of God for the people of God!

Most preachers who use the Lectionary may wish they were on vacation this week. There's little comfort in the texts. Division, persecution, destruction, and punishment are the theme of every reading. Isaiah speaks of the land being overrun by enemies. Because of Israel's injustice, God will no longer protect them.

In Luke, Jesus comes not to comfort but to agitate.

We see parallels in our national incivility between many with differing viewpoints, and from the inhospitality of so many toward strangers. Polarization is the norm, and these readings seem to fuel the flames.

From the highest levels of government, name calling and bullying have become the norm, and some of the most prominent evangelical Christians are leading the way, denouncing any who dare disagree with their doctrine and justifying the dehumanization of fellow Christians, not just in the battle between progressives and conservatives but in our government's traumatizing of immigrants with little regard to their legal status, and most of whom are Christian.

The reading from Luke doesn't ***seem*** to offer much help. Jesus ***appears*** to be the ultimate divider: no room for moderation or compromise. The issue is black and white, true and false, inclusion and exclusion, and, dare we say, saved and unsaved. No common ground exists between the faithful and infidel.

Luke's Jesus declares that families will split over their relationship with him. There's no doubt that was true in those early years: following Jesus meant the possibility in the Jewish world of exclusion from families or friends; among Gentiles it meant mockery or outright condemnation from Greco-Roman culture and empire.

And today Christian families split over their attitudes toward Donald Trump, either deifying him or demonizing him, and we forget that God is God, and Trump is not, nor are we.

There seems no way to soften Jesus' words, and they're used to condemn those who differ theologically or politically. I've seen these words weaponized by Christians who assume their beliefs, their lifestyle and biblical interpretation are absolute with no toleration for any other approach to truth, scripture, or behavior.

But whether in proclamation or in rebuttal, we need to remember that God is God and we're not, and we hold our faith, as Paul puts it "***in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us.***" (2 CORINTHIANS 4:7) Humility and repentance are appropriate responses from "children of light" and "children of darkness" alike.

Frankly, I'm not sure how to preach these words without provoking either divisiveness or self-righteousness, unless…

…unless we acknowledge that centuries of translations and layers and layers of closed doors of doctrine cloud our view of Luke's original intent in today's reading. Doctrines, once established, are dead ends of faith because they become entrenched in the life of Christian communities and further study aims, not at growing in faith and truth but confirming the doctrine. Doctrine replaces living faith.

But with further study, even some of the scholars I respect most slide right over this text. Let's step back and consider the whole passage. It begins: ***"I have come to cast fire upon the earth, and how I wish it were already ablaze! I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what constraint I am under until it is completed!***

The most common understanding is that the fire is a fire of judgment and punishment upon a sinful humanity. But, in context, Luke's readers were mainly Gentiles and would have thought of the myth of Prometheus, who restored the gift of fire to humanity but then was punished by Zeus. Two chapters earlier, Jesus spoke of his impending baptism of suffering, and Luke may have intended this association with Prometheus, who suffered for his gift to humanity.

As Luke does so often, he places a parenthesis around a theme: beginning with the prediction of John the Baptist that the coming one would baptize with fire and ending with cloven tongues of fire at Pentecost.[1]

So, rather than condemnation, the fire Jesus brings is the gift of God's presence in the kingdom Jesus announces.

Then comes the truly troubling part: ***"Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division."***

Again, the common understanding has interpreted the infinitive to mean, "in order to…" "for the purpose of…" The understanding has been that Jesus' presence was not intended to bring peace but division. That understanding is not supported

[1] The previous two paragraphs are adaptations from Craddock, Fred B.; Boring, M. Eugene Boring. *The People's New Testament Commentary* (p. 230). Westminster John Knox Press. Kindle Edition.

by any other text of Scripture.

And in whatever context evil is confronted with truth; in whatever context power is challenged with compassion and justice, division is revealed. Truth does not initiate division; it reveals it. Compassion and justice do not initiate power; they reveal the corruption of power sold out to greed and ambition.

But Jesus threw up his hands in frustration and shook his head. "You people just don't get it, do you? You can interpret the signs of weather, over which you have no control. But as to the daily happenings around you, which you might be able to influence, you're oblivious."

I remember a cliché from my youth: "Red skies in the morning, sailor take warning. Red skies at night, sailor's delight."

The late South African Bishop, Desmond Tutu, said, "If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor." The Anglo-Irish philosopher, Edmund Burke, said, "The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing."

I'm often tempted to just keep quiet (I don't yield to that temptation often). But to speak up for justice is to risk denunciation (often belligerent denunciation) from any who disagree—even from close friends and family. It's not that what I say causes division; although, it may fan the flames of division already present.

That's what Jesus intended: to speak truth and to practice compassion and justice, knowing that division will be brought to light.

It's not in this passage, but truth is a major theme in Luke's Gospel. For Luke, truth is something in process of being revealed. Jesus emphasizes that nothing is hidden that will not be disclosed and nothing is secret that will not be known.

And Luke connects truth with behavior and relationships, and presents truth and light as deeply intertwined, pointing to the illuminating, revealing, guiding function of God's Word become flesh in the person of Jesus.

As Christians, we believe that absolute truth exists; but as humans, we confess that we are not capable of comprehending truth absolutely. We can interpret "Red Skies in the Morning" because meteorologist have dedicated themselves to recognizing repeated and predictable patterns of nature.

And when it comes to truth and compassion and justice, we may not comprehend it absolutely, and certainly not in agreement with everyone else's understanding; but we have a model we can follow, one of whom even the scribes and chief priests said, "Teacher, we know that you are right in what you say and teach, and you show deference to no one but teach the way of God in accordance with truth."

Pray with me.