

“Divisive Jesus” GPPC 8-18-19
Hebrews 11:29-12:2, Luke 12:49-56

When I say the word “Jesus” what images come to your mind?

How about sweet baby Jesus. Don’t you just love sweet baby Jesus? [Sung] “The cattle are lowing; the poor baby wakes, but little Lord Jesus, no crying he makes.” Sweet baby Jesus. Don’t you just love sweet baby Jesus? Meek and mild. No crying he makes.

And there are all sorts of paintings of Jesus, you know. Maybe the most famous one is Sallman’s “Head of Christ.” It shows a grown-up Jesus with remarkably light-colored skin, especially considering he was a first century Palestinian Jew. Jesus is gazing up at the light with a gauzy, mellow expression on his face. So peaceful.

And there’s Jesus and the church is gathered around a nighttime campfire. The fire crackles and faces shine in the darkness and the people sing [Sung], “We are one in the Spirit; we are one in the Lord. We are one in the Spirit; we are one in the Lord.” It is so calming and such a sign and symbol of Christian unity.

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But then there is Jesus in our gospel reading this morning. “I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already burning! I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what stress I am under until it is completed! Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division!”

Wow! And we just sang Kum bah Yah a minute ago too. Somebody bring back sweet baby Jesus, or peaceful Jesus, or unifying Jesus. We want that Jesus.

But there is this other Jesus too. And we need this Jesus as much as we need the others.

In chapter 12 of Luke’s gospel, Jesus has just finished talking about faithful and unfaithful slaves, an illustration about the stewardship of our lives as we await the return of the Master. Are we doing what we are supposed to do? Are we ready or not?

And immediately following this, Jesus launches into one of his more challenging warnings in all of the gospels. “I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled!” This can also be

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translated as, “I came to throw fire to the earth.” What does this mean?

The scholars debate.

Fire can mean punishment. Fire is also something that purges and cleanses. We know Jesus comes to burn away that which is evil so that it might be replaced with what is good. Fire is also a symbol for God’s judgment. And one dictionary (*BADG*) says fire here may be the fire of discord.

There are multiple ways of understanding fire. But any way you look at it, when Jesus uses the image of fire, he does not mean for it to be taken lightly. Jesus comes to the earth to throw down fire. We should take that seriously.

Then he uses another odd expression. He says, “I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what stress I am under until it is completed!” What is Jesus talking about? He is talking about his own suffering and death. A suffering and death that will show his solidarity with humanity, and finally a suffering and death that will lead to the resurrection and redemption of humanity and the universe. Jesus is under stress as he awaits his baptism of suffering and death.

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And this leads to his strange question and answer. “Do you think I’ve come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division!” And Jesus goes on to say he will even bring division to families—fathers, sons, mothers, daughters—you get the idea.

“Do you think I’ve come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division!” Whether we like it or not, what we have here is a divisive Jesus.

But why? Why can’t Jesus just stay sweet baby Jesus? Or why can’t we relax with a peaceful Jesus? Or at least give us a unifying Jesus. Can’t we sing another verse of Kum bah Yah? But no. We get a divisive Jesus. Why?

Well, Jesus answers this question in a roundabout way. He says to the crowds, “You are so good at predicting the weather. Clouds in the west? It’s going to rain. South wind blowing? It’s going to be blazing hot. You’re good at reading the signs of the weather. You hypocrites! You understand the weather, but why don’t you know how to interpret the present time?”

Put it in modern terms. “Church, you’re so good at interpreting not only the weather but the stock market, the latest fashions, what’s cool and uncool, the best restaurants, the football rankings, and so on. So why don’t you know how to interpret the present time, the time of God’s kingdom breaking in, the time of God’s coming in Jesus and calling us to be his faithful people, the time of trying to make this world a better place?

We’re so good at interpreting many things. So why don’t we know how to interpret, how to understand and live into the reign of God that is dawning in Jesus Christ?

So here is how Jesus is divisive. He sets standards for us. Tells us what it means to follow him, what it means to be one of his disciples. And because he is Lord he makes claims upon every part of our lives.

And as one professor puts it, “Not everyone will respond positively to the good news that Jesus brings. In fact, many will actively resist. Jesus has no illusions of popularity or widespread acceptance...What is good news to some people sounds like judgment to others. The gospel challenges and critiques power, wealth, religious rules, and

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tradition.... The wealthy and powerful do not necessarily want the world to be straightened out because they may profit from the poverty and oppression of others. The transforming power of God's holy love will be met with hostility. The disciples of Jesus, then and now, should not be surprised by this." (Lynn Japinga, *Feasting on the Gospels: Luke, Vol. 2*, 20 and 22.)

We should not be surprised by hostility to God's holy love (notice what happened to the "honor roll" of the faithful in the reading from Hebrews this morning!). And we should not be surprised that Jesus is divisive. If we are going to follow Jesus, then that means more than worshiping, praying, and trying to be decent people (as important as those things are). It also means Jesus makes claims upon every aspect of our lives, including our political life, which elected representatives we support and which public policies we support.

I know that some of you hate to hear this, but it is true. And the more we are resistant to having God in Christ make claims upon our political life, the more our political life has become an idol to us.

"Jesus is Lord" was the earliest confession of the church. The church did not and could not say, "Caesar is Lord." So at the risk of

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torture and death at the hands of the Roman Empire, the church said, “Christ is Lord,” the most political statement in history.

But centuries later when Hitler and the Nazis came to power in Germany before World War II, Hitler had the support of most Christians in that country. These so called “German Christians” forgot the meaning of “Christ is Lord” and they supported Hitler’s racism, anti-Semitism, homophobia, hatred of gypsies and immigrants, war-mongering, and evil. It is one of the tragic and disgraceful parts of church history.

But Christians from our part of the church, what’s known as the Reformed stream of the Christian faith, stood with Lutherans and members of the United churches against Hitler and formed what was known as “The Confessing Church.” A number of the leaders in the Confessing Church wrote The Barmen Declaration that you will find in the Presbyterian Book of Confessions in our church library. In that declaration, again and again, the church stood against Hitler and the Nazis and declared the Lordship of Christ in every part of life. Some of the people who helped write the statement were murdered by the Nazis.

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Some had to flee Germany. But they declared Christ is Lord. Jesus is divisive that way.

Unfortunately, today we often resist his holy divisiveness in two ways.

The first is to adopt a mushy “civility.” Some of our clergy are the worst offenders for this because they are so worried about keeping their jobs. Whatever the issue may be: gun control, immigration reform, racism, treatment of families at the border, homophobia, climate change, you name it, and people will refuse to do the hard work of learning about the issue from reputable sources. (No. Fox News is not sufficient.) And they will say, “It doesn’t matter what people believe as long as they are polite to each other.”

Well, we certainly should try to be polite to each other, but as followers of the divisive Jesus, we are also called to take stands for people who are being mistreated. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. described the church as “the conscience of the nation,” that should be speaking truth to the country and its elected representatives. King said sometimes he was more upset with Christian “moderates” who tried to slow him

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down and keep him from making waves, than with avowed racists.

Silence in the face of oppression is complicity. As Desmond Tutu quotes the African proverb, “If an elephant is standing on the tail of a mouse, the mouse will not appreciate your neutrality.”

So when we see our elected representatives being cruel or telling lies or being racists, we’re expected to call them out, as we look in the mirror at ourselves too. Jesus is divisive that way.

The second way we are resisting the holy divisiveness of Jesus is with sloppiness of language and thinking. A favorite evasion these days is to say that someone may not be criticized for saying or doing something despicable, because that is “judgmental.” There you go “judging” people again.

Well, the word “judge” means to decide. We judge and decide all the time, because we have to. We judge whether something is true or not, whether it’s helpful or not, hateful or loving. We judge the words and behaviors of ourselves and others all the time. This is part of being a sane human being.

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What we cannot do and should not try to do is to judge the totality of ourselves or other people. We don't know enough about ourselves or other human beings to judge the entirety of someone. Complete judgment belongs solely to God, because only God possesses the divine wisdom, righteousness, and compassion to make such a judgment. Nonetheless, you and I are responsible for making lesser judgments all the time. Jesus is divisive that way.

Is there good news in all this? Absolutely. The writer of Hebrews says that Jesus endured the cross "for the sake of joy." Doing our difficult ministry is ultimately joyful, because it is aligned with Christ. Jesus is divisive because he calls us to move beyond selfishness to become a part of God's shalom. He calls us to speak truth to lies, to protect refugees, to feed the hungry, to clothe the naked. He calls us to find ways for all people to have decent affordable health care. By the way, at the meeting of Salem Presbytery yesterday, our presbytery (Presbyterian churches organized together in several counties our area) "adopted a resolution calling on the North Carolina legislature to approve the expansion of Medicaid to meet health care needs of many of

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our fellow citizens who are poor and who struggle for access to medical care.” (Facebook post from Steve Scott, Transitional Executive Presbyterian) How wonderful and joyful is that! We are working to make the world a better place.

Jesus also calls us to enact criminal justice reform that seeks restoration, not just punishment. He calls us to stand against White Supremacy. He calls us to protect the environment and to demand action to reverse climate change. The list goes on. Jesus is divisive that way.

Is everybody going to get on board? Nope. To use the language of the Old Testament, some Christians are going to be “stubborn and stiff-necked.”

But what is being offered to us is the opportunity to “interpret the present time,” to honor Christ as Lord in all aspects of life, and to do the ministry we have been called to do, knowing that we’ll do that ministry imperfectly and we will not complete it. But in God’s time, God will complete it, and complete it perfectly.

Don’t we live in exciting times? Times filled with possibility? Yes, we do. Yes, we do. Let us run the race for the sake of joy. Amen. ©Jeff

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