

A sermon delivered by Sister Janice Bachman, O.P., at the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, August 15, 2010.

“The Cost of Discipleship”

Jeremiah 23: 23-29; Luke 12: 29-56

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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The gospel for today is one of those passages whose meaning puzzles and eludes us. How can it be “Good News” when Jesus says that he comes to bring conflict and division – just when we are expecting that he bring peace? And, we may find this pronouncement difficult to reconcile with the other statements made about and by Jesus. He was called Prince of Peace by the prophet Isaiah and he himself said, “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.” Now Jesus is saying that he would set the earth on fire and bring about division! What’s it all about? What’s the connection here?

The readings for today provide us with an opportunity to continue to reflect on various aspects of the theme of discipleship we have been hearing the past several Sundays from Chapter 12 of Luke’s gospel. Today’s verses focus on the cost of discipleship. Let’s look more closely at these two readings to see what they reveal to us about the cost to Jeremiah as he responds to the call to be prophet, the cost to Jesus as he lives his response to the Father, and then look at what all this has to say to us who call ourselves disciples of Christ/Christian.

I

What about Jeremiah and his struggle to be faithful to his call to be prophet? What is at the root of his pain? In the section we just heard, the reader and listener are brought to an acute awareness of the inescapable presence of the Lord through a series of rhetorical questions. The text uses several similes to contrast the life-giving and powerful Word of God with the lies and useless dreams of the prophets. The language itself attests to the Lord's irrefutable presence with the repetition of phrases "declares the Lord," in contrast to the more ethereal "dream."

The Lord says, "Let the one who has my word speak it faithfully . . . Is not my word like fire." So, Jeremiah is beginning to grasp that if he is faithful to his call to be prophet, the Word of the Lord will cause division/inner pain within himself and among the peoples to whom he is prophesying. False prophets are recognized by their desire to please the audience, especially the rulers or the dominant mores of society. On the other hand, true prophets – then and now – proclaim the Word of God to their contemporaries, regardless of the consequences – which were and still are often tragic. It begins to dawn on Jeremiah that to be prophet is a wrenching ordeal if he is to be faithful in living and speaking the word.

II

Along this line, Jesus, aside from being king and priest, is also a prophet. While he may have been a man of peace, the message he proclaimed was clearly divisive. Many of the claims he made cut to the core of the dominant social and religious customs and understandings of the time. He made demands on people that challenged them to the very heart of their being. He insisted that commitment to him and to his message take precedence over any political and even kinship loyalties. This was the cause of the division described in the passage. Those who were originally bonded to each other by the closest of human ties were often torn apart by loyalty to him. Some who were able to accept him and his teachings were even ostracized by those who did not. The animosity Jesus generated was also the cause of his own rejection and ultimate suffering and death.

This teaching we hear in the gospel is presented from Jesus' perspective. He insists that his coming is comparable to a dramatic prophetic visitation. He says he has come to cast fire on the earth, to be baptized, and to cause division at the very heart of human society. It is not that Jesus is eager for these disturbing events in themselves to unfold. Rather, he himself burns with zeal for the accomplishment of his earthly mission, which, in calling for a radical change, will inevitably include such consequences. His loyalty is only to the Father. His kind of peace disturbs the status quo; it does not represent the perpetuation of the establishment. That is why Jesus was such a threat to the Pharisees and Sadducees – his person and his teachings would upset the entire social order.

III

And what about us who profess – through our baptism and through our daily lives – that we follow Christ? What about us who call ourselves Christian? Jesus' proclamation should make us look into ourselves and discover that we may be our first and worst enemy. For it is our own sinful and disordered desires and deeds that may have kept us from living according to God's word. Here, Jesus is reminding us of the radical nature of his ministry as he invites us, his followers of today, to participate in the radical nature of his ministry.

As I reflected on today's readings, I began thinking a lot about Dietrich Bonhoeffer, whom I believe took this gospel message to heart. A German, Lutheran pastor and theologian, Bonhoeffer was a participant in the German resistance movement against Nazism. The last two years of his life were spent in a Berlin prison. In 1945, he was executed at the age of 39 for complicity in a plot on Hitler's life.

His book, *Cost of Discipleship*, is a classic exposition of what it means to follow Christ in a modern world beset by a dangerous and criminal government. At the book's center stands an interpretation of the Sermon on the Mount, what Jesus demanded of his followers – and how the life of discipleship is to be continued in all ages of the post-resurrection church.

Bonhoeffer talks about grace and discipleship. He talks about two kinds of grace: **cheap grace** and **costly grace**. **Cheap grace**, he says, is the grace we bestow on ourselves . . . the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance . . . grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate. **Costly grace**, on the other hand, is the gospel that must be sought again and again, the gift that must be asked for, the door at which we must knock. Such grace is costly because it costs our lives, and it is grace because it gives us the only true life. Costly grace is the incarnation of God

Is it any wonder that God's word wants to be a hammer to break our rocks – the rocks of our flinty, piercing and rigid beliefs, understandings and misunderstandings – into little pieces so as to make them all new?

Are we ready to be set on fire? Are we ready to let our current understandings be smashed to pieces? Are we ready for the Word of the Lord? When we say, "Thanks be to God," we are saying yes, Lord, send your word to me here and take me someplace utterly new! Give me your fire, and splinter my rock. Bring me closer to the life of your kingdom, the life that you created me to live.

May the God of new fire bless you with a passion for truth and love. May this God, who has come to set a fire on the earth, fill your heart to overflowing with an awareness of your own goodness and an eagerness for the coming of God's kingdom all around you. May you embrace wholeheartedly and without reserve the call to claim and proclaim God's love and compassion for all peoples of the earth. May the God of new fire, the God of passion, bless you.