

SERMON
The Reverend Dr. Phebe L. McPherson
August 18, 2019

Luke 12:49-56

*People get ready, there's a train comin'
You don't need no baggage, you just get on board
All you need is faith to hear the diesels hummin'
You don't need no ticket you just thank the lord*
Curtis Mayfield

The verses from Luke this morning are perhaps the most troubling among all of the *hard sayings* of Jesus. Hard sayings. That is what this section of the Gospel of Luke are called. Jesus bringing fire to the earth, division among families....These verses describe a Jesus that many of us have not heard before.

“I have not come to bring peace, but a sword” says Jesus.

“I have come to divide mother against daughter, and father against son.”

We think only of the Jesus who speaks of uniting people not dividing them. We think of the Jesus whose purpose was peace. We sing praise in those beautiful titles of Jesus in Handel’s “Messiah.”

*“And he shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace.”*

But today, in these “hard sayings” we hear that Jesus has come to bring division and conflict.

One of the ways I prepare for preaching is to read the Gospel appointed for the Sunday early in the week and “live with it” as I go through the routines of work and leisure. The words pop up as I read the newspaper or have conversations or experience the everydayness of life. The appointed Gospel often reminds me of stories or events that have happened over my lifetime—

and in the *everydayness*, there is often a new connection or awareness that pops up and helps me to understand the *realness*—of what Jesus had in mind. Then and now. And sometimes, a song comes to mind. You know, there is a lot of music in Luke’s Gospel. Angels sing. *Glory to God in the highest!* And Mary and her cousin Elizabeth burst into song! Mary sings,

My soul doth magnify the Lord.”

If Luke had Jesus sing a song at this point in the story, which is what playwrights do when the emotions get too high for mere words, it might have gone something like this:

*People get ready, there's a train comin'
You don't need no baggage, you just get on board
All you need is faith to hear the diesels hummin'
You don't need no ticket you just thank the lord*

This 60’s tune got stuck in my head this week. Some of you might remember it. It’s a song from the Civil Rights Movement written by Curtis Mayfield. He is known for introducing social consciousness into African-American music. He was raised in the Cabrini-Green project of Chicago and witnessed many of the tragedies of the urban ghetto first hand. He is quoted as saying,

*With everything I saw on the streets as a young black kid,
it wasn't hard during the later fifties and sixties
for me to write my heartfelt way of how I visualized things,
how I thought things ought to be.*

Mayfield was unique in his ability to fuse relevant social commentary with melodies and lyrics that instilled a hopefulness for a better future in his listeners.

*People get ready, there's a train to Jordan
Picking up passengers coast to coast*

*Faith is the key, open the doors and board them
There's hope for all among those loved the most*

He might have well have said, “There’s change coming. Get ready. It won’t be easy. There will be people dividing up against each other.”

Mayfield wrote:

*There ain't no room for the hopeless sinner
whom would hurt all mankind
Just to save his own
Have pity on those whose chances grow thinner
For there is no hiding place against the kingdoms throne*

Jesus said,

*And when you see a cloud rising...
or the South wind blowing...*

Mayfield wrote,

*People get ready there's a train comin'
You don't need no baggage, just get on board
All you need is faith to hear the diesels hummin'
You don't need no ticket, just thank the lord*

Jesus said,

And so it happens...interpret the present time!

It’s not hard to imagine the kind of cruelties and injustices that Jesus witnessed as a young boy growing up in occupied Palestine. His world was occupied by the Roman army. It was only a matter of time before they would crush the City of Jerusalem, kill and scatter all the indigenous inhabitants of Palestine. By the time Jesus was a grown man he had witnessed enough—and he joined forces with John the Baptist and his followers—calling people out of their denial and

apathy into action. Faithfulness required the courage to “wake up!” And so, John called people into the desert where he preached and baptized them. When John was brutally killed, Jesus picked up his followers and continued his mission. In this passage—these hard words—Jesus confronts his countrymen with news—news of the severity of their cultural and political and religious condition.

“Did you think I came to bring peace?”

Denial is not peace. First there must be an awakening.

Following the passing of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Mayfield’s musical group, the *Impressions*, produced music that became the soundtrack to a summer of revolution—motivating and inspiring marchers. His lyrics on racial injustice, poverty and drugs became the poetry of a generation. Perhaps his lasting impact is in the fact that his music spread hope in the face of oppression and gave courage to a people in need of their human rights. He instilled a hopefulness for a better future. He instilled *black pride*.

What is it that Jesus instills in his followers? Like John the Baptist, he called his people to gather — to follow, not to form a military militia but to return to God and to their faith. To remember who they are! To be instilled with pride as the *People of God*. And never to forget.

There is a power in words, and in song when words just aren’t enough. I’ve often reflected on the miraculous power of Archbishop Desmond Tutu’s words. His only sermon, preached hundreds, thousands of times, to the people of South Africa were “You are very special people of God.” After preaching this over and over again—when these words finally became instilled, in-fleshed in his followers, when they finally believed, there was only one conclusion to make.

“If we are ‘very special children of God,’ then why are we being treated like this?”

And the world watched as the political, economic, social and spiritual plague of apartheid was overcome. It was messy. It took time. But Bishop Tutu’s words—calling people to remember who they are, continue to change the world.

It was Jesus' relationship with God that ultimately determined his identity and being and shaped his ministry and the mission of his church, his followers, then and now. Being *a very special child of God* set Jesus and his followers free. It is a choice we make over and over, day after day, as we respond to our culture, political and economic, social and spiritual. It often brings division. Family. Career. Power. Prestige. Money. Nationality. Race. Who or what is the determining relationship that gives you your identity and being? What relationship matters so much to you that you allow it to shape your life and give you your identity?

Jesus urges us to grow into the fullness of life and holiness as those who belong to God. Growth is difficult and often painful work. Growth requires the re-examine our relationships and the priorities we have. Growth requires the courage to acknowledge and live into the person God has created each of us to be. Life would be easier if you didn't take your faith seriously; The *hard sayings* of Jesus are only hard because they call us to live by our convictions; to walk the walk as well as to talk the talk. We cannot just hear what we want to hear. We cannot just love those we want to love. We cannot serve only those we want to serve. We cannot put our faith in a drawer and take it out in certain circles at certain times.

Take stock of the way things are and the way they are going. Do not let the world lull you into denial and sleep. Awake to your true self as a *very special child of God*. Know your true identity. And get on board.

*People get ready, there's a train comin'
You don't need no baggage, you just get on board*

Re-align your priorities in the light of God's purposes. Know what is most important and what helps build a life of grace. Let go of the things that hold you back and make you afraid. Have the courage to be the person and to be the community that God has created in YOU and calls forth in US. Gather together and be the People of God. I'm not saying that it's easy. But, it makes all the difference.

You don't need no ticket you just thank the lord

Amen.