

Sermon by the Rev. Bollin M. Millner, Jr.
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Pentecost XIII
Grace and Holy Trinity Church
Richmond, Virginia

Hebrews 11:29-12:2

By faith the people passed through the Red Sea as if it were dry land, but when the Egyptians attempted to do so they were drowned. By faith the walls of Jericho fell after they had been encircled for seven days. By faith Rahab the prostitute did not perish with those who were disobedient, because she had received the spies in peace.

And what more should I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets-- who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, quenched raging fire, escaped the edge of the sword, won strength out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. Women received their dead by resurrection. Others were tortured, refusing to accept release, in order to obtain a better resurrection. Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned to death, they were sawn in two, they were killed by the sword; they went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, persecuted, tormented-- of whom the world was not worthy. They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground.

Yet all these, though they were commended for their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had provided something better so that they would not, apart from us, be made perfect.

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.

Luke 12:49-56

Jesus said, "I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! 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! From now on five in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three; 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."*

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. And when you see the south wind blowing, you say, 'There will be scorching heat'; and it happens. 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?"

It is great to be worship here and with you this morning. I am grateful to the Wardens, Vestry, Staff and Volunteers who have been working so hard and well while I have been away on sabbatical. Everyone has done a superb job of keeping the mission of the church moving forward.

My sabbatical was a good one. I had some time to read and to connect with the awesome library at Union Theological Seminary.

I have been able to work on my personal spiritual journey and in particular establish some new patterns of prayer that work better for me at this time in my life.

For the vacation piece of my time away, Katherine and I went to her extended family reunion which was held in Estes Park Colorado. My oldest son and his wife flew in from London for this. My younger son and his wife flew out from Charlottesville, so our nuclear family was altogether...they threw us a surprise 40th wedding anniversary party...which was wonderful. And Katherine and I drove, so we were on the road for weeks, coming and going, and loved every minute of it. What an amazing country we have.

One place we wanted to visit was the Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve¹ in the flint hills of Kansas. It was established in 2002. Tallgrass prairie once covered 170 million acres of North America and today there is less than 4% remaining.

The preserve we visited is about 11,000 acres and it is home to a growing herd of bison...so you can walk out into the middle of a prairie and see what it all used to look like...and yes...I did see bison. I didn't get to see the whole herd because this bull was guarding the path and wouldn't let me pass. I tried for about 45 minutes, but no go. He weighed a bit more than me and can run 35 miles an hour so I didn't press it.

At any rate, in order to see the preserve in the morning before it got too hot, we drove in the night before and stayed in a small little town nearby...I mean small, ...last time it was thriving was in the 19th century...one cobblestone street with the courthouse as the end of it...the town is called Cottonwood Falls.

¹ <https://www.nps.gov/tapr/index.htm>

We were there on a Friday night and it turned out that every Friday night, right there at the end of the street near the courthouse, musicians would come from miles around and give a free concert. There were about 8 or so musicians...guitar players, fiddle, dobro, stand up bass...and they'd take turns each one singing a song. Katherine and I joined the audience of about 25 or so people and listened to some great music for a couple of hours. It was one of those serendipitous moments.

One of the players sang a song I'd never heard before and was just stunned by it. You all know that this summer has been a violent one...in Iraq, Bangladesh, France, the UK, Turkey, in Florida, in Texas and more besides.

This song was offered as a response, as a word...to help us through. The first verse runs:

*I heard an owl call last night homeless and confused
And I stood naked and bewildered by the evil people do.
And up upon a hill there is a terrible sign
That tells the story of what darkness waits
If we leave the light behind.*

And the refrain:

*So don't tell me hate is ever right or God's will
These are the wheels we put in motion ourselves
And the whole world weeps and is weeping still
Though shaken I still believe the best of what we all can be
And the only peace this world will know, Can only come from love.²*

I spoke with the singer and found out where the song came from...it was written a few years back by a woman by the name of Carrie Newcomer. Needless to say, I've added that song to my playlist. Now, I know you can't get the full power of it with me just reading it...and I've gotten the chords and am hoping the Amazing Grace Choir can learn it...but still, I think you can feel it. I certainly did that evening on the street of Cottonwood Falls, Kansas. There is power in those words.

² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L8WC2Y3CS8Y>

Words do have power. And there is certainly power in the words of Jesus this morning in the gospel too, isn't there? I am stunned by those as well. The Jesus we meet in Luke chapter 12 is not the one we prefer, in all likelihood. This is not the meek and mild Jesus with little children in his lap.

Jesus said, "I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! ...Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division!"

I have come to bring fire. I have come to bring division. What does Jesus mean? He is not preaching hate. He is not saying hate is ever right or God's will. But he is talking about judgment. He is talking about decision.

The coming of Jesus, the mission of Jesus provokes a crisis. We have to choose...one way or the other. For him or against him. And the judgment we receive is on the basis of the choices we make...the judgment we receive are the wheels we set in motion ourselves.

As one commentator has said, "Wherever the Word of God has been heard, division has occurred among the people who heard it...Peace has a price, too. The absence of conflict is not a present possibility. One can only choose the cause for which to fight and the commitments that are worth holding."³ I might also add, we can choose our allies in the fight, and the tactics of the fight as well.

We are here this morning because we have chosen Jesus, above all else. We are here to receive the Spirit and in that power, to be the Body of Christ...for each other and for the world. We stand under God's judgment. So we confess not only our faith but our sins.

Conflicts there will be...but let us stand together in the light of the gospel and face the darkness... let us face those conflicts together.

Let us put aside all pettiness and bitterness, our anger and spite, let us lay aside every weight and sin that clings so closely and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us.

³ See Volume 10, The New Interpreter's Bible, page 267.

You know the devil loves it when the children of light fight each other! Let's not do that. Let the conflicts be with those who choose hate and have left the light behind. Let us embrace our allies, and not only those who have chosen Jesus but others, not of this fold but who still fight for the right, for God's justice.

And if we do, the words of the song I heard that summer evening in Cottonwood Falls Kansas come true...

*Though shaken I still believe the best of what we all can be
And the only peace this world will know, Can only come from love.*

Let us, together, with the fire of God judging us and burning away our sin, move into the conflict and onward to God's peace in the name of Love. Amen.