

Luke 12:49-56

Jesus said, "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! 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?*

Signs of the Times: We Stand with Women! - August 14, 2022

Luke 12:49-56

Does today's scripture lesson surprise you? Jesus just told us that he came not to bring peace, but division! Doesn't that fly in the face of everything we preach about Jesus? Isn't he supposed to be "Gentle Jesus, meek and mild?" Don't we sing, "He never said a mumblin' word" as he went to the cross to die? Didn't he tell his listeners, "Come to me, all you are weary and carrying heavy burdens and I will give you rest? How can Jesus, whose ministry was all about spreading the love of God to the world suddenly declare. "I have come to cast fire upon the earth!"

Friends, these truly are divisive times. Historically, it seems our nation must experience times of great division and out of the chaos reunite to create something different. The American Revolution, no matter what you were taught in school, was a fractious time when our country was born. Families were indeed split three against two and two against three. The Civil War pitted fathers against sons and mothers against daughters.

At the center of both of these world-changing events was Jesus. Did you know that in England, King George III called the American Revolution, "The Presbyterian War?" He did. He did because many of the leaders in the war were presbyterians. Moreover, in our presbyterian understanding of the scriptures, no one human being should have total control of the church or for that matter, the government. Our presbyterian system is all about people choosing their leaders, including the pastor. We don't have a bishop. We don't have a pope. The Constitution of the United States, written largely by presbyterians, puts power in the hands of an elected congress and limits the powers of the president. In short, a total contrast to the way things were done in England. Presbyterians thought and still think our system is how Jesus would want it — so we fought and died for it. On the interpretation of scripture hinged the birth of a nation.

Jesus, obviously, is at the center of the Civil War. The real issue was not state's rights, but slavery. Are all people created equal, or not? By the time the first shots were fired, Americans had to make a choice about slavery. Was it God's will or not? Yes, Jesus used slaves as illustrations in his stories and he lived in the Roman Empire where 25% of the people were slaves. Yes, it is true that Jesus did not directly condemn slavery. However, his teachings made it obvious that slaves were as welcome in God's realm as anyone else. The Apostle Paul declared that in Christ there is no Jew or Greek, Male or Female, Slave or Free. All are one. On the interpretation of scripture hinged the future of the nation.

Friends, in 2022, our nation finds itself once again at a critical juncture and once again, Jesus is at the center of it all. “That’s funny,” you may say, “neither the right nor the left are invoking Jesus to justify their ideas. What’s Jesus got to do with all this?”

Everything. What is at stake right now are two very contrasting ideas about how humans should relate to each other. In a way, what we are revisiting today are issues never fully settled from the Civil War or, for that matter, from the American Revolution. The fundamental question is this: does the human race consist of a hierarchy in which some people are automatically and permanently better than others solely as a result of their physical characteristics and therefore can use their status to dominate others?

The interpretation of scripture plays a critical role in answering this question and it hinges on the answer to this: did Jesus come into the world to help human beings live a better life here and now or did Jesus come into the world principally to prepare humanity for a permanent future with God that will start after we die.

This debate is hardly new. Indeed, humans from almost every society stretching back over the centuries and blanketing almost every civilization shared a common assumption about life and living: each of us was assigned our station in life by God. Therefore obeying God consists of one thing: accept your assigned place in God’s appointed hierarchy and perform your role as God expects you to do. If you are a slave, accept you are a slave and be the best slave you can. If you are a woman, accept that you are subservient to your husband and acknowledge he has the full right to give or withhold what he wants from you because God made it so. If you are a stranger in a strange land, be prepared to be mistreated. If you are a widow or orphan, God ordained it that way. If you are a king, enjoy your rule. If you are rich, enjoy your luxury. The system, the hierarchy, was lubricated by priests and other religious officials who could threaten those who deviated from the hierarchical order with punishments and even death because supposedly God designed it that way.

The idea of human society being a structured hierarchy created by God and enforced by God’s priests or ministers is certainly convenient should you happen to be at the top of the hierarchy. Scripture itself offers various verses which buttress these ideas. Genesis 3:16 states, “To the woman [God] said, “I will make your pangs in childbirth exceedingly great; in pain you shall bring forth children, yet your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you.” Ecclesiastes 8:2 declares, “Keep the king’s command, and because of your sacred oath do not be terrified; go from his presence; do not delay when the matter is unpleasant, for he does whatever he pleases.” James 2:5 declares, “Listen, my beloved brothers and sisters. Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him?” And 1 Peter

2:18 urges, "Slaves, be subject to your masters with all respect, not only those who are good and gentle but also those who are dishonest."

These are but a few scriptural examples used to enforce the idea of a hierarchy based on maintaining the status quo. Now in our time, the hierarchy of the status quo is crumbling. Let's face it friends, who has been running America since day 1? Three answers: Rich. White. Males. Privilege, race, and gender. The interesting thing is that not one of the rich, white, males who claim to be at the top of society asked to be born rich, asked to be born white, or asked to be born male. Of course, some white men who are rich were not born that way. Nonetheless, because they are white and because they are male there can be no doubt that their path to wealth was far smoother than the journeys of non-white males or females.

What we are witnessing in America is the death throes of the Rich White Male system of privilege and hierarchy. One political organization is desperately pulling out all stops to change laws and remove rights from the non-Rich, non-White, and non-Males to insure its continued dominance.

But when Jesus came along the hierarchy of his day feared him because Jesus is very, very disturbing. Sadly, I must say that Christ's Church has spent most of its existence sanitizing Jesus so that he would appear to be removed from the concerns of the real world. After all, one of our most famous confessions, the Apostle's Creed, summarizes Jesus' life as follows: He was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead and buried. That's it! There is nothing in this creed that tells us what Jesus actually did during his time on earth. Jesus was born, he lived, he died, he was raised from the dead. End of story. In short, one of the essential documents of the Christian Faith ignores the substance of Jesus' ministry. Totally!

Looking at our creeds, one may rightly ask, why was Jesus killed? Was he randomly selected to die on a cross? Did he antagonize people which made them upset with him? If so, what did Jesus do to get people so angry with him that they wanted to kill him?

It's disturbing that over the centuries many of Jesus' healings and other interactions with people have been interpreted as if he were a Marvel superhero. Is a child dying? Jesus says the word and presto, the child is healed! A man is blind? Jesus spits on some mud, rubs it on the man's eyes and magic, he can see! A woman is constantly bleeding? She touches Jesus' robe and instantly the bleeding stops. The church likes portraying Jesus as some kind of superhero, running around Israel and solving problems.

But over the years, we're so obsessed with Jesus' demonstrating his power that we've ignored the more critical element of identifying the people with whom he interacted. In almost every case, Jesus brought his healing powers not to those at the top, but the dregs and rejects of society. The first

human to whom Jesus revealed he was the Messiah was a foreign woman not even married to her partner! Jesus rescued a prostitute, dined with a tax collector, healed the servant of a Roman, touched lepers, the list goes on. He even said how hard it would be for the rich to enter God's realm! That really confused his followers. Jesus frequently criticized the leaders of his own Jewish faith for their hypocrisy. While he did not attack the Roman Emperor, he drew a major distinction between giving the Emperor his due and giving God God's due.

I don't know how else to interpret Jesus' mission and ministry except as his being a living example of how God intended the world to work. Jesus proved that in God's realm all were equal. There is no justification to discriminate on the basis of race, religion, gender, nationality, health, marital status and much more. Jesus welcomed everyone and because he did, he was despised by the hierarchy of his day.

That's where we find ourselves today: whether we choose to define America as a society based on hierarchy or a society based on equality.

That is why Collingswood Presbyterian Church displays a banner on our fence stating that, "We Stand with Women." We say we stand with women because Jesus stood with women, not as servants, not as objects, but as full human beings with equal rights and responsibilities. We oppose any system that segregates women or deprives women of their rights or denies them their freedoms. No man, no person of wealth, no white individual can use his gender, money, or race to dictate how another human being should live. Jesus died precisely because he affirmed the equality of humanity. Let us be direct. The sign on our fence was hung as our response to the Supreme Court's decision overturning *Roe versus Wade*, the case which for fifty years gave women the power to choose to give or not give birth on their own terms.

Some have tried to cast the decision to remove the right for all women in this nation to choose how to handle their pregnancies as a simple case of preserving the life of the human being growing within a woman. In short, to those opposed to *Roe*, human life begins at conception and therefore, the fetus growing within the woman is entitled to all the protections, rights, and privileges society can offer.

And yes, if indeed there were universal agreement that human life began at the moment of conception, abortion could be considered a form of murder. But here friends is the problem: there is decidedly not universal agreement as to when human life begins. I am not going to go into the myriad of views and interpretations of scripture except to say that our Jewish friends, who consider what we call the Old Testament as their holy scripture, do not recognize human life as starting until it emerges from the mother's womb. Otherwise, it is considered to be "water" for the first forty days and then merely another part of the mother's body, like an arm or leg, thereafter.

No question many organizations have done a remarkable sales job trying to persuade us that life begins at conception — but a sales job is all that it is. There is no universal definition of when human life begins. Therefore any unilateral declaration that human life begins at conception comes from a top-down hierarchy which puts the interests of an undeserving, arbitrary minority ahead of the interests and rights of the majority. Jesus lived and died to proclaim all interests, like all people, must be respected. Not that anything goes, but control only for the purpose of control is unacceptable.

A woman's decision to go forward with her pregnancy is never made in a vacuum. While the news that she is pregnant is greeted with joy by most women, there are immediately a huge list of questions which necessarily follow. Will the child be healthy or has it been exposed to chemicals or virus's which could damage it? Where do I obtain care? What if I am pregnant because of rape or incest, can I deal with raising a child I almost certainly don't want and can't love? If the child is born, can I take care of it? Can I afford it? If it has medical problems, can I get help? Where will we live? How do I support my family? And so many other questions.

If a woman asks these questions and receives no answers, if society is not prepared to give her answers, if a hierarchy insists on a woman giving birth regardless of her circumstances but is unwilling or unable to help the mother and her newborn child, is not the child being aborted by society after it is born? Forget about putting the child up for adoption. If it happens to be white and healthy, yes it might go to a responsible home. No guarantees with any other babies.

A myth perpetuated by our current hierarchy is the mistaken idea that most women use abortion as a form of birth control. Let me tell you our Presbyterian Church USA makes it clear that abortion is not for birth control.

But such has not been my experience in counseling women considering abortion. I believe that the decision to abort a pregnancy is the most difficult decision a woman (and possibly her partner) can make. Most women do weigh all the options and conclude they cannot take care of a child at that particular time. To attempt to do so could significantly damage the mental and physical health of both the mother and child. In short, the only person who can and should decide to have an abortion is the mother herself. Most women make the decision with utter seriousness and even more, they think about their decision the rest of their lives.

Right now in our country, a small hierarchy is attempting to dictate what women can do with their bodies. It is no different from small groups of elites throughout history mandating slavery, male dominance, wealth without responsibility, and all the other ways the few try to control the many.

Jesus showed us that all of us are equal before God. All of us report to God and not society and not hierarchies for how we choose to use the bodies God gave us. This church stands with women because Jesus stands with women.

I say these words in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.