

A TROUBLING TEACHING

A SERMON FOR ORDINARY TIME
SUNDAY, AUGUST 18, 2013
FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
MARIANNA, FLORIDA
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LUKE 12:49-56

One of my old friends, who has been retired several years, is just beginning a temporary pastorate. He says he enjoys preaching in retirement, because he can pull out all his old sermons and preach them over and over again.

Well, good for him! I can't do that. I follow the lectionary lessons, and while I admit that I've re-written a couple of sermons since I've been here in Marianna, most of the time I'm writing new sermons every week.

Someone asked me recently how long it took me to write a sermon. My answer was an hour and forty five years.

I'm sure in forty five years of preaching, I've preached on this text before. I can't possible have been on vacation or study leave this Sunday in August every year for the last forty-five. But this text only occurs every third year, so that reduces the chances or increases them. And I suspect that when I've preached on this text in the past, if I ever did, I focused on the last half, the part about the cloud rising and the wind blowing and the interpretation of the present time.

Let me say just a word about that: all the prophets that point at wars and rumors of wars, earthquakes, tornadoes, hurricanes, and tell us that these are signs of God's judgment and of the imminent coming of the Christ stand in line with prophets over the last two thousand years who have done the same. The Biblical signs are such that they fit every time in which there are wars and disasters, and every time in the history of the world has been a time of wars and disasters. Jesus is coming. He comes every day. He will come again in glory some day. Be ready. As I said last Sunday, be alert.

But this week, I want to focus on that troubling teaching of Jesus, the first five verses of the lesson for the day.

Those verses almost contradict; go against, everything that I believe about the coming of Jesus into the world. Didn't the angels sing about peace on earth, good will towards men?

Yet here Jesus asks, "Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth?" And he answers, "No, I tell you, rather division."

And then he gives those troubling divisions of households, father against son, mother against daughter, mother-in-law against daughter-in-law.

There are several things in the New Testament which I wish Jesus hadn't said, or if He had to say them, that Matthew, Mark, Luke and John hadn't bothered to write them down. This troubling teaching is truly one of them.

My favorite source, William Barclay, has little to say about this passage, but what he says rings true: (Jesus') coming would inevitably mean divisions....That was one of the great reasons why the Romans hated Christianity—because it tore families in two. Over and over again a man had to decide whether he loved his kith and kin or Christ better. The essence of Christianity is that loyalty to Christ has to take precedence over the dearest loyalties of this earth. A man must be prepared to count all things for loss for the excellence of Jesus Christ.”

The Gospel of Luke, p. 174

It is as true today as it was in Roman times. If one in a family is a follower of Christ, and the rest of the family isn't, then the family is divided. And it works the other way: if a whole family is devoted to Christ, and there is one who is not, the family is also split.

Sometimes the divisions are deep. Sometimes they are superficial. For more than forty years, there was a division between my mother-in-law and me. She could not understand why Polly and I could never be at her house on Christmas Eve. No amount of explaining that I had services on Christmas Eve would console her. When I said, “Don't you expect your pastor to be at your church on Christmas Eve, she said, ‘Of course. But if Polly was married to him, they could come over after church!’”

Dear hearts, one of the reasons that Polly and I have been married so long and so happily is that we've always lived at least 250 miles from anyone we were related to by blood or marriage. And our relationship with our son and his wife has improved since we came to Marianna and added an extra four hundred miles to our distance from them!

Faithfully following the call of Christ, faithfully serving God, will create divisions in the most saintly of families, for we do not always discern the will of God in the same way.

In the great motion picture *Chariots of Fire*, the hero, Eric Liddell, is the son of missionaries to China. He and his sister have been sent to Edinburgh for their education. While there, it becomes obvious that Eric may just be the world's fastest man, the one capable of winning the Olympic gold medal in the hundred yard dash. He became known as “The Flying Scotsman.”

Eric was a star in other sports as well: rugby, soccer, cricket. He may have been the finest athlete of the 1920's. As the 1924 Olympics approached, he trained to enter.

His sister argued that he should abandon his dream of running in the Olympics, and return to the mission field. That, she says, is what God has called them to do. He answers her by saying, “But sister, when I run, I can feel God's pleasure.”

And of course, he did win an Olympic gold, but not in the hundred yard dash. A qualifying race was run on Sunday, and he refused to run on Sunday. So instead, he ran the longer, more difficult 400 meter race, in which his time was mediocre. But on the day of the Olympic final, there was Eric Liddell, capturing gold in the 400 meters on a Monday. The record he set in that race lasted for twelve years.

The rest of the story is that Eric returned to China, and lived out his life as a missionary. When asked if he ever regretted leaving behind the fame and glory of athletics, he responded: “It's natural for a chap to think over all that sometimes, but I'm glad at the work I'm engaged in now. A fellow's life counts for far more at this than the other.”

Chariots of Fire won an Academy Award for Best Picture in 1981, but the rest of the story has never been told. It would make an even better movie.

Eric Liddell not only served the rest of his life as a missionary to China, he stayed in China when he could have been evacuated ahead of the Japanese invasion, and spent the war years in a Japanese prison camp. He could have come out of that camp in early 1945, due to his severe medical problems, but instead gave up his place to a pregnant woman. On February 21, 1945, at the age of 43, Eric Liddell died in that Japanese prison camp in his beloved China, at the age of 43.

His family was divided, even at his death, for he had sent his beloved wife, Florence, to Canada with their children when the first call for evacuation of missionaries was issued.

If we would serve Christ, if we would follow Jesus, if we would be Christians, in the world in which we live, it will divide us from friends, it will divide us from family, it will come at a cost, maybe even the cost of our lives.

But it is the way of the cross, the way of Christ, the way we must go if we would be faithful followers of the one who came to bring peace that is not peace to the earth.

In one of my favorite poems, set to music in some of our hymnals, written in the year that Eric Liddell won his Olympic gold, William Alexander Percy wrote:
“The peace of God, it is not peace, but strife closed in the sod.
Yet, brothers, for just one thing: the marvelous peace of God.”

Amen and amen.