

Pentecost 13C + August 14, 2016
Atonement Lutheran Church, Beloit
Luke 12:49-56

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I admit it: I enjoy keeping track of the weather and its patterns. I know other people who do, too. It's not uncommon to be working away in the office and to hear Pattye Gilmour, the queen of Accu-Weather, suddenly call out: "Rain in 21 minutes!"

For me it's not so much the need to know the local weather, but more a fascination with the Earth's natural forces, what is going on with the layers of air that God has given us to breathe, and how they are affected by differences in air pressure, temperature and moisture. Or maybe it's because I grew up in Southern California, where a "weather event" consisted of puffy white clouds peeking over the mountains, a sign that in two or three days we might have a few drops of rain.

In our startling Gospel reading for today, Jesus takes the crowds, and us, to task for this preoccupation with weather. "When you see a cloud rising in the west, you immediately say, 'It is going to rain'; and so it happens," he says, probably in loud and stern voice.⁵⁵ "And when you see the south wind blowing, you say, 'There will be scorching heat'; and it happens."⁵⁶ "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?"

You might think, it's not that hard to interpret the present time. Look around: The world is in crisis. Yesterday there was another fatal police-related shooting from a traffic stop, this time in Milwaukee. The possibility of acts of terrorism are causing many around the world to live in fear. The political situation here in America is troubling no matter which way you look it. Speaking of weather, climate change is wreaking havoc. How can a foot of rain fall in Baton Rouge in just one

day? Less dramatic but still significant, here in Wisconsin a great growing season is hurting successful farmers: Because of a high yield, corn and soybeans are selling at half of what they did 3 years ago, and milk prices are at a 10-year low. We can see the troubles all around us.

But Jesus wants us to interpret the present time in a much more personal way, one that involves our families and close communities. Here in this Gospel reading we have a much different picture of Jesus than the one who, back in Luke 2, was heralded for bringing peace to all the earth. Here he seems to contradict that completely! “Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth?” he demands of the crowd. “No, I tell you, but rather division! ⁵²From now on five in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three....”

What can Jesus possibly mean? How could breaking up families be something that is in any way a good thing where God’s kingdom is concerned?

As with so much else in the Bible, we need to pan back a few steps to get a broader view. This is called context. To understand a given verse, you have to know the context. In last week’s Gospel reading, Jesus said, “Do not be afraid, little flock, for it IS your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom.” God’s kingdom has already been given to us, as we said, in the ministry and person of Jesus Christ.

Now Jesus is telling us to be ready for his return. Lutherans don’t tend to talk much about what other traditions call “the Second Coming,” but actually we do affirm it in our worship. Remember these words? “He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end,” and, “We look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come.” What is this from? The Nicene Creed.

Right before our Gospel reading for today begins, Jesus tells a little parable about being ready. On the one hand we have the faithful servant, who is hard at work when his master arrives,

just as he should be. On the other hand is the unfaithful servant, who -- when he hears his master is delayed -- decides to get drunk and then beats up the other servants. The parable concludes with these memorable words: "From everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required; and from the one to whom much has been entrusted, even more will be demanded." (Luke 12:48)

Jesus is talking about stewardship and accountability, in addition to vigilance. If we are preparing ourselves for Jesus' return, it means that our lives -- everything we have and do -- must be oriented around him. Like the good servant, we are positioning ourselves to be as faithful, obedient, and resourceful as we can be, knowing what our Lord requires of us. That means that the love of God is the basis for everything we think, say, and do.

Because of this, we wouldn't want ourselves to be distracted or hijacked by those for whom the love of self, not God, is the basis for their lives—someone who cares only about self-promotion, only about accumulating wealth, only about getting their way, only about fighting back against perceived insults. Would we want that person to be our Lord, our master, our shepherd?

But dedicating our lives to following Christ is how Jesus brings division. The bonds within families and within close communities, are broken when some stand firm Christ while others do not. For Jesus this is not only legitimate, it is a necessary consequence of his mission. Nonetheless, it is still difficult for him and for all who experience the dissolving of these old ties of kinship.

"What stress I am under," Jesus says, "until it is completed!"

I was hesitant to draw a parallel with this congregation, but finally decided it's important for us to make that connection. What Jesus is describing—"three against two, two against three"—is pretty much what Atonement has been through, especially in the last few years. I don't know all of it and in fact I don't know the half of it, because I haven't asked anyone to tell me the

whole story. I've just been picking up fragments in passing conversation. But I'm convinced that our Gospel reading today tells it like it is here, or more correctly, like it was. In this sense, being reduced to a membership of about 60 and an average attendance of a third of that is actually...good news! That is because those of you who have remained are God's faithful servants, using all your gifts and abilities to orient yourselves and the life of this community around Jesus Christ. I'm not saying those who left Atonement aren't faithful, but simply that they have made different choices. So then, what a firm foundation this gives us for the future, with Jesus Christ at the center!

This is why Jesus' name is so powerful. "All hail the power of Jesus' name," we will sing, in seven glorious stanzas. Don't think "oh no, seven verses," but instead, take this opportunity to ponder in your heart all these wonderful images for Jesus and his flock that the hymn writer gives us. Jesus is offspring of the family of Jesse; he is "God incarnate, man divine"; and of course he is wearing a royal diadem, "a jeweled crown worn as a symbol of sovereignty." And here also in these stanzas are images of Jesus' people: the Jews who recognized him as Christ; the Gentiles, who are "heirs of David's line"; and we sinners, who experience God's mercy and forgiveness through the crucified Christ, as we remember, in the words of Lamentations 3:19, our "affliction and our misery, the wormwood and the gall." And what a glorious prayer the hymn concludes with:

Oh, that with yonder sacred throng
we at his feet may fall!
We'll join the everlasting song
and crown him Lord of all.

Thanks be to God for the victory in Jesus Christ!

AMEN.