



20TH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

19 August 2007

Jeremiah 23.23-29

Psalm 82

Hebrews 11.29-12.2

Luke 12.49-56

"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!" Yowza!! Whatever happened to sweet, benign Jesus? Where's the cooing, little baby of Bethlehem? The gentle, smiling Jesus surrounded by all the little kids? Well, that Jesus hasn't up and left—but all that nice stuff—it's only a part of Jesus. Besides, you can bet the notion of a Jesus born homeless and in a barn and the Jesus who tells us that noisy, squirming, and running-around children are first in the dominion of God—you can bet even that Jesus would upset our own apple carts if we ever got around to thinking about it too much.

Justification by grace through faith; a phrase that falls easily from our lips - especially from the lips of those of us who are cradle Lutherans. It means that we are already completely righteous before God, completely just before God—all of it a gift from God, ours simply for trusting that it is so. And, we hope, that's the beginning and end of it. We get this promise in Holy Baptism, a promise reaffirmed in the Holy Eucharist: nothing more we need to be right with God. And that's true—and I will affirm that day in and day out with my every breath. No good work on earth would be complete enough or enough untainted by our egos to earn us God's favor. And likewise, nothing we do can mess it up either. But this righteousness that is given to us . . . it is not merely a legal declaration of innocence—it is much, much, much more.

I was sorely tempted this morning to find a half-dozen or so signs and post them in our worship space—several surrounding the baptismal font—several more up here where we come to receive the true Body and Blood of Christ. The signs would scream out in big, bold letters set against a high-contrast background: "DANGER!" and "EXTREME HAZARD!" In Holy Baptism, God proclaims that we are in fact united with Christ. And in the Eucharist we receive Christ into our bodies—and those are both a very, very dangerous turn of events. To be justified—that is to be very, truly, really, whether-we-like-it-or-not united with Christ, made alive with Christ in us—to be justified is extremely hazardous. In Holy Baptism, in the Words of Absolution, and in the Holy Eucharist we are never taken out of this world, we are not ever transported to some peaceful Eden in the 'burbs, some happy place of the mind. We are rather thrown right into the fire, the fire God in Christ kindled when from the cross Christ spoke words of forgiveness over threats of revenge, the fire God kindled when Christ chose self-sacrifice over power-filled acts retribution, the fire kindled when God in Christ chose to wage peace against the engines of death, the fire kindled when God in Christ chose to dine with tax-collectors, prostitutes, children, women, foreigners, and, yes, even the self-righteous rather than limit the table to a select few. And in Easter, Christ's victory over death—the resurrection showing forth that the way to the life of the ages is always through the fire, is always by way of the cross—the Jesus way and for us.

Walking through the fire, however, does mess things up—messes up our lives and our relationships. Sacrificial giving of our resources can mess up the interior decorating scheme and the vacation plans, not to mention the shoe collection. But sacrificial giving's just the easy part. Dom Helder Camara, the noted Latin American liberation theologian, once said, "When I give bread to the poor, they call me a saint. But when I ask why the poor have no bread they call me a communist." Here in this country it can be the exact

opposite. Talk about poverty and you're merely a concerned citizen, or at worst, a liberal; actually feed the poor and hungry and you become a bad neighbor, attracting to the corner of 16th and Grant the unsavory and the unpretty and the downright unpleasant like crap attracts flies. (No kidding—I've actually heard that complaint.) But then again, it's OK to say that you welcome diversity—you're being nice Christians; but even begin do the work of dismantling institutionalized racism and you're deemed downright crazy—(What white privilege? Me?? My dad was the banker, not me. My grandfather's family owned the mine, not me. We're all equal here right?? Right???)

And it's OK to decorate the place with a few lesbians, gay men, and a tranny or two—you're merely a bit odd; afford sexual minorities the rights and responsibilities enshrined in law and church policy for the mainstream majority—or challenge heterosexual privilege, and you don't belong in the church anymore. Talk about peace in terms vague and general, and you're a follower of the Prince of Peace; speak out publicly against the war in Iraq and the hell we've made that country into—or refrain from reading the names of the dead United States soldiers until you can also read the names of the innocent Iraqi dead—and you fall somewhere on a spectrum ranging from "a bit much," through "unpatriotic and radical" all the way to "cooperating with the terrorists." Pray for the healing of the sick and you're doing what you're supposed to do, but plead and work for high-quality, universal health care to be the most basic of human rights and you've strayed from the work of the church and become—horror of horrors, an activist. Talk lots about the priesthood of all believers, and you're squarely in Martin Luther's camp; question why some have so very much more power—be they bureaucrats, bishops, or white male, straight, tenured teachers of theology—and suddenly your priestly persona is strictly non grata, and you're even less popular than Jeremiah, thank heaven he's dead. Sing sweetly Mary's song in the course of the liturgy, her song about the mighty being toppled from their thrones and the rich being sent away empty and you're probably OK—but trust that it is the work and will of God to lift up the lowly and fill the hungry with good things—and you're in deepest trouble—witness the martyrdom of Blessed Martin Luther King, Jr. and Blessed Oscar Romero. Or be like Blessed Rosa Parks, who refused to move to the back of the bus, be like other saints of blistered feet who would not ride the busses because justice had been too long deferred and therefore denied—and dogs and fire hoses will be at the ready. Go one step further: surrender power, white privilege, and middle-class entitlements, start to live in solidarity with the poor and powerless, really empty ourselves of ourselves—and ouch—it hurts, it hurts bad, it hurts real bad maybe this Jesus thing is something to reconsider, something to tame, something best confined to Sunday mornings, innocuous rituals, and sweet, jaunty hymns that make us happy to have come to church. This discipleship thing . . . it could be a real downer.

Justification by grace through faith—you are, here and now, highly favored of God, and you did nothing to earn it and you can give nothing to keep it and you can do nothing to get it taken away. But it does most surely mean that you have very really been united with Christ—in a life and death like Christ's. The disturbing wind is blowing, and there is scorching heat. The fire has been kindled and it burns with hottest flame. And with Christ you are in the midst of it all. And with Christ you shall get burned . . . if you haven't already—and if you have, well, there's more to come. But too, in God's time, you have already come through the fire and the burns already healed over (though the scars forever remaining)—and you are already raised with the Christ (the one who still bears the marks of crown, nails, and spear) and truly the life of the ages is already yours.

So come now, receive Christ into your bodies—yes, danger and extreme hazard, but too—in, with, and under the bread and wine—strength, greatest strength, and the sure and certain hope that neither fire nor division will truly or long harm you—for Christ goes with you through it all, all the way through it, until the day of your Resurrection, until the day when Christ is finished—making all creation new!!