PENTECOST 13
August 14, 2016
9:30 a.m.
Rev. Todd Goldschmidt, Pastor

Theme: Whose Side Are You On?


49 “I have come to bring fire on the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! 50 But I have a baptism to undergo, and what constraint I am under until it is completed! 51 Do you think I came to bring peace on earth? No, I tell you, but division. 52 From now on there will be five in one family divided against each other, three against two and two against three. 53 They will be divided, father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law.”
His name is David now. David William, to be exact. He chose the name David when he became a Christian. David was born into a Muslim family in Pakistan. His parents named him Amjed—Arabic for “Greater Glory.” Over time, Amjed married, moved to the United States and settled in Bellevue, WA. He got a job as a parking garage attendant at the Hyatt building on the corner of NE 8th St. and Bellevue Way. A member of our congregation—Bill Ruthford—had his law practice in that high-rise for many years. If you know Bill at all, then it shouldn’t surprise you that he befriended Amjed and helped him work out a dispute with a neighbor over the placement of a fence. Due to his kindness and willingness to help, Bill won the opportunity to share Jesus with Amjed. The Holy Spirit worked through God’s Word, leading Amjed to put his trust in a God who loved him so much that He was willing to sacrifice His only Son for him. “That’s the kind of God I want,” Amjed told Bill and me. Then he said, “My name will be David. David William.”

But becoming a follower of Jesus cost David his mother’s love and approval. She disowned David for converting to Christianity. His own brother threatened to kill him if he ever saw him again. Very shortly after his conversion, David lost his job at the parking garage in Bellevue as well another part-time position working in the kitchen and dining room at a nearby retirement community. He still hasn’t told his wife that he’s a Christian for fear that she would let her brother know. Her brother is their landlord and David is concerned that he might evict them if he found out. He has told his children, however, and they’ve been very supportive and even inquisitive about his new-found faith in Jesus. Two of them have even attended worship services here with their father. Despite everything he’s lost, David still says with a big smile on his face: “I would never trade what I’ve lost for what I have in Jesus. I will trust in him as long as I live until He takes me ‘over there.’” David calls heaven: “over there.” And he can’t wait to get there!

David can relate to Jesus’ words in today’s text better than anyone I know. While he’s blessed to have found in Jesus a peace that passes all human comprehension, David knows by experience what his Savior means when He states: “Do you think I came to bring peace on earth? No, I tell you, but division.” In the parallel passage from Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus concludes, “a man’s enemies will be the members of his own household” (10:36). The “Prince of Peace” wields a mighty sword! In our 2nd Lesson, Paul calls it the “sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God” (Eph 6:17). It’s the only offensive weapon in “the full armor of God” Paul bids us don in our spiritual battle “against the devil’s schemes” and in our “struggle … against the rulers … the authorities … the powers of this dark world … and … the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms” (v. 11-12). The “sword of the Spirit—the word of God”—is the weapon we wield, and not even “the gates of hell” itself can “prevail against it” (Matt. 16:18b, ESV)! God’s Word is “alive and active, sharper than any double-edged sword … it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart” (4:12) the writer of Hebrews avows. Friends, either the Bible is 100% true or its 100% suspect. So which is it to us? Whose side are we on—God’s or the world’s?
In 2nd Corinthians, Paul wrote: “For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ” (10:3-5). As the Reformer Martin Luther puts it in his hymn “A Mighty Fortress is Our God” (CW 200/201): “One little word” of God “can fell” the devil (v. 3). If that’s the case, it’s no wonder that “the old evil foe” does whatever he can to make sure we unplug from God’s Word. He strives with all of his evil might to drive a wedge between Jesus and us. He uses tried and true methods—wily schemes that’ve proven successful since the dawn of time: guilt and shame the drive us to despair; willful rebellion that we minimize; sins we shift the blame for; lukewarm faith that blinds us to our dire need to feast on Jesus, the Bread of Life, and dissolves our desire to slake our spiritual thirst at “the springs of living water” (Rev. 7:17) in heaven once & for all.

This morning Jesus asks us, “Do you think I came to bring peace on earth?” And He answers, “No, I tell you, [not peace] but division.” Wait a second! Stop the bus! Didn’t Isaiah prophesy about the coming “Prince of Peace” (9:6)? Didn’t the angels declare “peace on earth” in Luke 2:14 when they announced the Savior’s arrival? But Jesus has a different declaration. He will be the source of strife and conflict, of disagreement and division on earth. Just ask our friend David William. People will squabble about the truth of Jesus’ words. They’ll draw swords against each other in heated conflict over His claims. The facts of His all-atoning, sacrificial death on the cross for sins of mankind and of His triumphant resurrection from the dead have become history’s greatest scandal. When persecution comes, friends and family members will turn on each other and betray each other. Yet when Judgment Day dawns, Jesus will be the dividing line by which families and nations are split forever. God’s angels will transport believers to heaven while unbelievers will be consigned to eternal suffering with Satan and his ilk in hell.

Was Jesus prophesy in our text for today accurate? History bears it out. There is no more controversial figure in the entire human race than Jesus of Nazareth. He has been revered as God incarnate and cursed as a man-made delusion. He has transformed countless lives by the power of His Holy Spirit even while “scholars” have tried to disprove His very existence—despite the fact that secular historian Flavius Josephus wrote about Jesus in his Antiquities of the Jews circa 93-94 A.D. No, the kind of peace the world seeks is harmony among the nations and people of this planet. Jesus made it clear that His peace is of a different order. It reconciles God with His traitorous creatures—sinful souls like us with a holy God. It puts a new Spirit in our once-conflicted heart. It’s an inner serenity, a peace from above. But it’s not a universal peace among nations, ethnicities, tribes and races here on earth—or even within families who live under the same roof, far too often. Truth is, many people despise Jesus today like they did when He walked this earth. That will always be the case. It’s human nature to rage against God & despise His will.
Who would’ve thought that the infant in Bethlehem would be so scandalous? But the Enemy knew it in the Garden. Herod saw it in a star, and Pilate heart it from the mobs. No one could make such kingly claims without controversy, even when demonstrating their truth through miraculous acts of compassion, divine authority and wisdom from above. Human arrogance will bow to no Lord, especially One who reveals its sin. The Prince of Peace? Absolutely! But not the kind the world expects. Ours is a deeper, better, everlasting peace! In his commentary on the Gospels, (Arrow Printing, Bemidji, MN 1986), Rev. Wenzel says of the parallel passage in Mark’s Gospel:

Christ, self-evidently, does not mean to say that He is come with the purpose to send the sword. The result of His coming is rather contemplated. Christ is come to do away with sin by atoning for it. But this divides the world into two great armies, the one with the Gospel of peace, the other with the sword. Some accept the forgiveness of sins offered them, others reject it. Some love God; others hate Him. Their interests are divided. Some serve God; others the devil. Some fight for the kingdom of God; others for the kingdom of Satan. Dissension and strife are inevitable (p. 296)

So the question remains, “Whose side are we on—God’s or Satan’s?” Let’s end on Jesus’ opening words from our text: “I have come to bring fire on the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! But I have a baptism to undergo, and what constraint I am under until it is completed!” One of the most painful fiery trials we endure is division within our earthly families—a split predicated on the connection each individual family member has with Jesus. It’s said that “blood is thicker than water” when it comes to kinfolk. But Jesus’ blood is even thicker than that! Whenever sinners come to trust in Jesus, they instantly gain a new Father, a new Brother, a new Comforter, new angelic bodyguards and a whole new family of fellow believers scattered across the globe! Christianity has no caste system; no “pecking order”; no ethnic tensions. St. Paul wrote in Romans 12:5 – “so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others.”

In a vision of heaven Jesus gave St. John in the Book of Revelation, he saw a “great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands” (7:9). John saw those saints only because Jesus set His eyes on the “joy” of having us by His side for all eternity—a “joy” that compelled Him onward, so that He “endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God” where He lives to intercede for us day and night. The writer of Hebrews adds, “Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners so that you will not grow weary and lose heart” (12:2-3). Jesus pledges to strengthen and guide us by His Spirit every moment of our earthly lives and “give the crown of life” to all who “overcome” the trials and tribulations along life’s broken road. Friends, ask David whose side he’s on. I guarantee he’ll smile broadly as he answers, “Jesus!” May we follow suit! Amen.