

August 18, 2019 - Pentecost 10C

“Standing on Edge to Follow Jesus” - © Rev. Seth D. Jones

Scripture: Luke 12:49-56

Jesus ends our reading today with these words:

“When you see a cloud rising in the west, you say at once, ‘A shower is coming.’ And so it happens. 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?”

Remember last week when I said things get more intense the closer we get to Jerusalem with Jesus? Today’s reading is really intense. Fire, division, deep criticism - Jesus is pretty tweaked up. He is, by his own admission, stressed out.

“How great is my distress until all this is finished...”, he says.

From what Jesus is saying, it appears it would be a great help to Jesus if the disciples would take some of the responsibility of understanding what is actually going on and not let Jesus be the only interpreter of the signs of the times. But who would want to be? If Jesus will light the world on fire and divide houses and families, maybe it is best to just let him do it.

Much of this sermon came to me as I walked the Rockland Breakwater. The breakwater divides the Rockland Harbor from the inner sea lane between us and the islands. The division between the harbor and the sea lane serves a purpose, but the breakwater is just there. The wind, the waves, the sea do what they do and the breakwater stays where it is, as it has for almost 130 years. It would be ridiculous to choose sides as you walk the breakwater, to choose the harborside over the sea lane side, to choose the water on one side over the water on the other side.

From the edgy perspective of following Jesus and knowing that the Kingdom of God has drawn near, we are not about choosing sides in human concerns. At the same time, we know that the mere choosing for the Kingdom of God can be divisive wherever the Kingdom of God is presenting itself. The old order resists. The new order believes all earthly things will change as soon as everyone comes on board with their side. The Jesus Order seeks the Kingdom of God, because we know that is where our treasure, our joy, our love, our peace lays. And it can divide. But the mistake for us is to presume God is only on one side, when in actuality God is all around, just as the water surrounds the Breakwater.

In a couple weeks, I will be beginning my doctoral program out in Oregon, at Portland Seminary. The program, led by Dr. Leonard Sweet, is entitled “**Semiotics, Church, and Culture**”. It could just as easily be called, “**A Doctoral Program in How to Interpret the Present Time**”. Semiotics is simply the study of symbols and their meaning. I will be spending the next three years doing a deep study of sign interpretation and learning how to better interpret the changing times while still being a follower of Jesus. Saying it here makes it sound like I am learning tightrope walking, and it kind of is. Sign reading is what Jesus calls his disciples to do in this reading today, and the implication is that reading the signs, interpreting the age, can create difficulty and division for both interpreter and listener alike.

Let's begin with the reality of the situation. Jesus tells us the world is about to be set on fire, and he wishes it already was. Another way to say this is that everyone has been set on edge, as if something - an event, a person, a massive change - is going to ignite everything. Perhaps this is always true: that the world always stands on the precipice of being lit up, either figuratively or literally. Last week, a meteor missed the earth by 2.4 million miles, which sounds like a long ways away, but it is actually pretty close in cosmic measurements. A month or so ago, the sun released a massive solar flare which, had it hit us, would have zapped the GPS satellites and also many communication satellites, not to mention melted the power cables in many cities. Chances are radically low that any one of these cataclysmic events will strike us at any given time - but they have in the past. Chance or miracle, either way we are moments away from being lit up from events far beyond our control.

Politically, environmentally, spiritually - these are difficult times we are living through right now. We are all 'on edge' in one concern or another. Jesus could just as easily be speaking about today as he was speaking of the signs of the times 2000 years ago.

Jesus is speaking about the coming of the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom of God begins with Jesus' ministry, makes itself known through Jesus' journey to the Cross, and becomes a continuing world event with Jesus' resurrection. In choosing to follow Jesus, we choose to participate in that Kingdom of God - spiritually in our lives of faith, and literally in our actions in this temporal, ephemeral, transient world.

So in order to understand what Jesus is up to, we need to understand some things about the Kingdom of God. By looking at the life of Jesus we can see that The Kingdom of God makes itself known wherever people are fed, wherever people are healed, wherever God's justice reigns and has come to pass, wherever those who are like little children are welcomed. Paul puts it this way in Romans 14:

17 For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.

For the disciples, and for us, the Kingdom of God has something to do with justice - justice being “*righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit*”. Justice in the Bible looks like people being fed, housed, cared for, people being healed and having access to healing, people being treated justly and justice being enacted fairly for those who have previously had justice exacted against them because of skin color, sexual orientation, political and religious beliefs, place of origin. So, for all practical purposes, the Kingdom of God looks like love acting in the world. It looks like Jesus.

This Jesus-in-the-world and this waiting-for-the-Kingdom-of-God thing Jesus calls us all to puts people on edge and is really uncomfortable. We live in a disturbed and disturbing present. But the ‘edginess’ of the times is a clue. The divisions Jesus speaks of are not because Jesus is in and of himself divisive. People who seek healing, welcome children, and feed the people are not people who seek to actively divide people. But Jesus’ mere presence is divisive, especially to the status quo. The Kingdom of God becoming visible is divisive for those who stand to be judged lacking by the standards of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.

Divisiveness is a human thing. Choosing sides is something we all do. The culture we live in, the friends we have, our families all want you and I to choose sides. The reasons for choosing one side or another are many, and those on each side marshal their reasons so as to convince us to align ourselves with them.

Jesus doesn’t participate in that. When we chose to follow Jesus and therefore aligned ourselves with the Kingdom of God, we long ago left human divisiveness behind; while at the same time recognizing that our choosing God’s justice, God’s love, God’s peace, God’s presence can itself be a divisive thing. Choosing Jesus is an edgy place to live from. Even as the culture is on edge, we stand on an edge with Jesus.

When I say **edgy**, what I mean is we, as followers of Jesus, choose to stand on the edge of the divisions of others, while also recognizing our choice to stand on the Jesus edge is itself a divisive decision. We may lose relationships, friends, and even family members because we refuse to fall in line. Maybe family want us to side with the devotees of President Trump, or with the followers of the Alexandra Ocasia-Cortez squad. Maybe you are trying to thread the needle in a disagreement about global warming. For you, as someone who is waiting for the coming of the Kingdom of God, you have already aligned yourself with the goodness of God’s creation, since Eden is the first Kingdom of God, and so it doesn’t really matter the causes or the reasons for climate change. What matters, when we are standing on the edge with God’s creative power, is how we will be the best

possible steward of the here and not yet Kingdom of God that we have been given to care for, this Creation which was created and will be transformed.

Can you see how standing on the edge with Jesus can make everyone angry and can be divisive just because our allegiance is with Jesus and not with the side-taking everyone wants us to participate in? Our faith commitments mean that sometimes we must choose sides in the world, but we must also recognize that when we choose sides, we are likely sacrificing our ability to read the signs of the culture. It is the cost of choosing sides. Our discernment and prayer for the guidance of the Holy Spirit is required in those moments. Perhaps it is the moment you decide to stand with the marchers during the Civil Rights movement. Perhaps it is the moment when you decide action is required in a family conflict and that action means you stand with someone against another's addiction or abuse.

Where is the edge for you today?

Will you choose sides, or will you stay on the edge and continue to read and interpret the signs?

What does the Holy Spirit call you to now?

At least today, Jesus calls the disciples, and us, to be edgy people, people who stand on the edge and interpret the day and age for the sake of the coming Kingdom of God, not according to the whims and wild swings of the political and personal concerns of the day.

Maybe a non-political example of edge-standing will help. About 2 years into Kate and my time at Colonial Church of Edina, MN, a new minister was called as senior minister. CCE was a large church with staff and several ministers. During the search process, the new minister made it clear that he was volatile, edgy, creative and unorthodox in his ministry style. The search committee recommended him, knowing this. The church voted him in with virtual unanimous approval. I became good friends with the new minister from the beginning. We met regularly before all of what I am about to tell you went down. I was also good friends with several of the people on the search committee, several of whom left the church during the crisis.

Almost immediately upon the new minister's arrival, trouble began. The staff had to call in a mediator for their second staff meeting, because the new minister was ready to fire everyone and was yelling at everyone. During worship, the new minister would make everyone get up and go to new seats during the service. He was edgy, creative, unorthodox, and volatile.

The church began to split. People left. Groups met off-campus to decide what to do about the new pastor. The off-campus group convinced the board of trustees to present the pastor with a resignation letter 10 months after he started.

It was horrible. I was in seminary at the time and was deeply involved with many aspects of our church. Supporters of the new pastor wanted me on their side. Those who were aligning against him wanted me on their side. And it was in the midst of this that I took a very edgy stance. I am not saying it was the right stance, but I am also pretty sure it wasn't the wrong one either.

Anyway, the stance I took was this. When the supporters of the new minister came to me, I would say,

“Listen. In any conflict, there are several possibilities. One is that everyone is right. What you are saying is true, and what they are saying is also true. Another possibility is that one side is wrong and the other right. This would mean that the capacity to determine such a thing would require some standard that wasn't met. It appears to me, the truth has become very hazy in all of this, so it can't be that both are right. And it also appears to me that neither side in this has more or better information than the other, so it can't be that you are right and they are wrong. So that leaves only one other possibility, and it is the possibility that is always overlooked in a conflict. Couldn't it be possible that everyone is wrong about this and there is no right answer because everyone is wrong?”

I said the same thing when the other side came to me.

As you can imagine, telling people that not only they are wrong but the side they chose is also wrong, because everyone was wrong, did not win me friends and nor did it influence people. My stance was divisive because it called out the divisiveness rather than choosing a side.

When all of us committed to the faith, we committed to the coming of the Kingdom of God and to following Jesus. It means we committed to an edgy stance. In this commitment, we became those who walk between two worlds - the world of our fellow human beings and creation, and the world of Christ and Heaven. We became those who bind the wounds of division for those who come to us, even as our stance as a follower of Christ, called out divisions. Our desires, compassion, and love, were aligned with the Kingdom of God seek the healing of those who have rejected faith and those who have come to believe at the same time. We became those who, in the midst of a world awaiting the great fire, the emblazoning event, took those signs and signals and interpreted them for the sake of God's love, God's peace, God's joy. Standing on the edge is a work of deep

spiritual alchemy and it is dangerous and profound. Being an edge-dweller with Jesus is an edgy act of faith.

One of the last things the beleaguered pastor told me when all this conflict came to a head at CCE, as we sat at a coffee shop together, was that church divisions like the one we were experiencing served Satan. He said to me, *“For myself, I am just trying to follow Jesus.”*

After Jesus declares the foundation of his ministry in Luke 4, the people in the temple are so offended they take Jesus to the side of a cliff to throw him over. While standing at the edge of the cliff, Jesus looks around, sees people taking sides and, as Scripture says,

Luke 4:30 *But passing through their midst, he went away.*

Jesus didn't take the sides of human conflicts. He followed something else. Jesus followed the edgy path of the coming of the Kingdom of God. When conflicts arise- and if we are truly following Jesus, they will arise- the pastoral advice of my former pastor stands well for all of us. Be edgy. Read the signs of the times, just as a fisherman reads the waves and knows the weather that is coming, or the pilot reads the clouds and knows where the winds are blowing. The sea is all around the dividing breakwater. Stand where Jesus stood and say to those who are asking you to choose sides, *“For myself, I am just trying to follow Jesus.”* Pass through their midst and continue to seek the Kingdom of God.

Amen.