

Upheaval and Salvation

I find it helpful simply to pull back from these disturbing words of Jesus and to look at the context in which they appear. What Jesus is doing is getting his followers ready for the upheaval that is coming with his death, his resurrection, his ascension, the coming of the Holy Spirit, and the launching of the earliest church. Wow! The disciples are on the brink of an absolutely glorious and absolutely terrifying several months. They will be participants in God's decisive move to bring healing to his world.

And Jesus is working with them in all of these teachings in the twelfth chapter. So, we go back to 12.32 and we hear Jesus basically saying, "Don't be fear-driven guys, God's in control. Throw fear to the wind and invest your efforts in helping the poor and seeking the peace of the city." Then Jesus shifts gears and tells his disciples to keep themselves on the brink of readiness. "Don't let any delay become an excuse to take your eye off the ball. God is moving. Pay attention."

Now comes our lesson that I'll skip over for a moment in order to mention what comes after. Immediately after our lesson, Jesus tells his listeners to use their discernment skills to keep track of what is going on around them. And then he tells them to be smart enough to stay out of unnecessary conflict with people.

The whole sweep of this chapter could be described as: readiness training for times when God is moving powerfully.

Our text today is in the middle of this. Before we even ponder what it says we know that it is going to be something about being ready for coming times of change and salvation.

So what does Jesus say? He says that what's coming isn't going to be nice and pretty with Barry Manilow singing on the sound track. As the psychologist Fritz Perls put it, sometimes people need to fall to pieces before they can come to their senses. Jesus is saying, don't think that the world will get fixed after everyone gets reasonable and apologizes and unselfish and generous. God is going to redeem the world in the midst of upheaval with everyone at everyone else's throat.

It's significant that Jesus lists the possible forms of conflict. It's not just the republicans and democrats or the Muslims and the Hindus who will be in conflict. It'll be families that will be wracked by division. Jesus goes to the trouble to spell out every possible conflict. Father and son. And son and father. Mother and daughter. So goes the whole list. Jesus may as well have said. First cousins once removed will be mad at second cousins.

So, what was the "take away" for the disciples? If you're uncomfortable with conflict, change your attitude, because

there's going to be lots of conflict that will go along with God and Christ redeeming the world.

Let me tell you about my week last week. I'm not going to tell you that I've had a big upheaval or a troubling health situation or a family tragedy. Just the opposite. Last week by all accounts was a very quiet week. It's August. People are away on vacation. Our church is in summer mode.

So, why do I feel this edginess?

Well I had a little time to do some reading. Read an article on Iran's nuclear program and the several countries, including the United States, that are determined that that isn't going to happen. I see little coming there that might avert conflict. I read another article about the decline of men. I've long known that men are in trouble—especially less affluent men. In fact I've written articles on the subject back in the 1990's. Here's what kind of smacked me. What I worried about a decade ago is happening. Men and boys really are not succeeding, not leading, not marrying, and not flourishing.

I read some political commentary and survey results. We've got a leadership problem in America and polling data that proves it. The problem increasingly is that broad swaths of the leadership class in our society—business leaders, leaders in entertainment and culture, and statesman—are inspiring little confidence.

Then there's the economy. The economy that is stalling. We're hearing expressions like "double dip recessions," or "lost decade," or "new normal." Here's my insight on the economy. I visit people in the hospital. Do you know what the most difficult time is for a patient facing a serious illness? The most difficult time is the time of setback or relapse. Patients can face courageously a terrifying diagnosis or a complicated surgery. But nothing saps a person's courage like being in recovery and then getting sicker again. Well, we've got a slowdown in economic recovery and I think that has really put America on edge.

The edginess is layered and layered. It isn't one big thing to worry about. It's dozens of things. I learned that there are 6 textile mills that have quietly ceased operations within the city limits of LaGrange. What a sad and disturbing development for our great little city that held promise to be one of America's outstanding micro-politan areas when I first came here 6½ years ago.

I could go on. But here's where this is going. As I think of all the things in our world and maybe in our personal lives right now to be distressed about, it bears a similarity to that listing of troubles in Jesus' teaching today. Father against son, son against father. Daughter-in-law against mother-in-law, brother against sister and on and on. Maybe one way to think

about our lesson this morning is to see it as God's whisper to you and me in an edgy time saying, "Be cool. I do my best work in situations of upheaval."

Wherever did we get the idea that Christianity is at its best when everybody's happy, everybody goes to church and the world around is generally supportive? How many of us—maybe myself included—have longed for the good old days when families went to church on Sunday and communities respected Christian values, and everybody agreed on what truth was? We'd do well to remember some of the insights of Charles Sheldon. Charles Sheldon was the pastor of a Congregational Church in Topeka, Kansas in 1896. Now that situation would have to be the most placid, traditional slice of Americana I could imagine. As the story goes, Charles Sheldon wanted to do something about his poorly attended Sunday evening church service. His tactic was each week to read a chapter of a novel he was writing. Each chapter ended with a cliff-hanger situation designed to lure congregants back the next week to find out what happened. Well the resulting book was titled; In His Steps, which has come to be the most famous devotional book written in America. It's from In His Steps that we get the motto, "What would Jesus do?"

Now, I tell you about In His Steps because it is obvious to me that Charles Sheldon has a deep understanding that Christian faith always stirs up conflict. One of his characters, to use a

representative example is named Rachel. Rachel has a stunning operatic voice and a promising career with one of the East Coast opera companies. But Rachel, in the novel, has a turning point in her Christian faith, and chooses to use her singing to enrich the evangelistic tent meetings that are being conducted in the downtown slums of her city. Rachel's mother—who turns out to be deeply invested in Rachel's career prospects—is mortified. The painful chill between mother and daughter is a theme that traces through In His Steps. "I came to bring fire to the earth."

I use this illustration too much, but it is so powerful that I'll repeat it in case you've missed it. In 410 a.d. when Aleric the Goth sacked the city of Rome. Suddenly, the greatest civilization that the world had seen was finished. Rome by that late date was technically Christian. Roman citizens throughout the Mediterranean world—like good citizens anywhere—grieved the ending of their country. In the Roman city of Hippo in the northern part of Africa, Christians and Roman citizens streamed into the cathedral church. Their bishop—the greatest Christian mind since the Apostle Paul—Aurelius Augustine—rose to preach to his people. Here's in effect what he said. "Friends, we grieve over the loss of our Empire to which we are citizens. But we also possess a great hope. We are also citizens of a greater empire that is coming into the world—even the Kingdom of God." Much of Augustine's mature work was sorting out as a Christian

the meaning of the crumbling of the Roman Empire. Indeed Augustine's death occurred even as the Goth's were destroying his own city—Hippo.

Now, I don't wish to get melodramatic. We're not at present looking at the crumbling of our civilization. But there are problems aplenty and it feels unsettling. And Jesus' words are equal to our situation. "My job," says Jesus, "is not to fulfill your expectation on how you'd like history to smooth out and go nice and steadily improve. My job is the business of saving the world. And that will be messy. It will be uncomfortable. People will be divided. That's what you can expect. And when you see it, don't panic, keep on being my disciple. God's love and fairness will ever be the coin of the realm that is coming.