

Proper 15 Year C: 17 & 18 August 2019
St. James' Episcopal Church, Clinton NY
The Reverend Gary Cyr

“Both, compassion and anger, coexist within each of us where the fire of baptism calms the anger while the Eucharist feeds the compassionate heart.”

Isaiah 5: 1-7
Hebrews 11: 29- 12:2
Luke 12: 49-56
Psalm 80: 1-2, 8-18

There is a Cherokee story told among the Native peoples that tells of an elder sharing with a child that there is a battle between two wolves waging within him. One, the elder says, is an angry wolf full of envy and jealousy, sorrow and regret, greed and arrogance, self-pity and guilt, resentment and inferiority, lies and false pride, superiority and ego. The other is a compassionate wolf full of peace and love, hope and serenity, humility and kindness, benevolence and empathy, generosity and truth. The child asks the elder, “which wolf wins?” The elder replies, “the one you feed.”

What goes unsaid in the story is that one must seek not to be hostile towards the angry wolf; that one must resist the urge to deny its existence or try to suppress it, for doing so inadvertently feeds the wolf and allows it to become powerful. Rather, one must calmly recognize and accept its presence, therefore allowing the angry wolf to simply exist thus robbing it of its ability to control or thwart one's well-being. The story, at its core, speaks to a person's spiritual and moral compass, much as the lesson from Isaiah and Luke's Gospel do.

The moral condition of Israel, the soul of a nation, is bankrupt: morally bankrupt. Utilizing the analogy of a vineyard, God, whose providence is love, is deeply grieved and filled with outrage. Humanity's providence is greed and ingratitude towards the many blessings God has bestowed upon it. God's disappointment in the chosen people will soon result in their being deprived of their land, property, and possessions. They will soon become the dispossessed, the exiled, strangers in a foreign land where they will spend their days pining for God's grace and forgiveness - to be reconciled with God. Israel is feeding the wrong wolf while seemingly ignoring that it even exists. I find it interesting that in the midst of prosperity and

abundance a society can be gorging itself into blissful ignorance of its moral emptiness. It is a recipe for a spiritual crisis.

Speaking of spiritual crisis – it sounds like Jesus has eaten a bowl of sour grapes as he tells his followers that there will be family discord amongst those who follow him. This is not the peacenik Jesus so often depicted in stain glass windows tenderly guiding his flock or gathering the children round about him. This Jesus sounds a tad perturbed, which I am not surprised at since his followers often did not understand his message. I get it that he is a tad put out with them. Yet something else is at work here. Something that aligns with Isaiah's warning: that being the cost of discipleship.

When we choose to follow Christ, when we make a covenant with God, we choose a path that will put us at odds with much of society. To walk with Christ is to be morally aligned with God's plan to reconcile all things in Christ. The judgment that Isaiah is alluding to as well as the judgment that Jesus is warning of is the price we must pay for genuine reconciliation. We have fooled ourselves into believing that reconciliation is simple; that we just ask for forgiveness from those we have wronged by acknowledging that we have done them wrong. This is a tad naïve. Archbishop Desmond Tutu showed the world what heartfelt genuine reconciliation looks like in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. It is painful and divisive – not warm and fuzzy. It requires deep listening to the stories of suffering from those who have endured it. It requires the tormentor to listen without judgment or reprisal. It requires repentance for truly honest lasting forgiveness to be established. There is a promise of real transformation in such reconciliation, but it does not come easily or cheaply.

And when Jesus speaks of a baptism of fire, he is speaking of a fire through baptism that burns away sin. A fire that refines the soul and renews the spirit. A fire that tempers the mantle of faith into righteousness. We become warriors for the cause of justice rather than blind participants in social exploitation. If you think such a commitment to Christ will not cause familial divisions, think again. It will not only cause division within families, it will cause division within society as well, for such a commitment to Christ exposes moral bankruptcy and spiritual decay. The prophetic voice of Isaiah and Jesus requires that we, who walk in the way of the cross, expose such bankruptcy and decay, exposing it to the light of Christ and the grace of God's Spirit.

When I think about which wolf our current culture is feeding, I am dismayed at what I see: the duplicity that masquerades as Christian witness. Recently, Immigration Customs Enforcement set about enforcing the law of our land by rounding up individuals understood to be in the country illegally. They descended upon food processing plants and detained hundreds and hundreds of individuals so as to sort out who is legal and who is not. Some have been deported; others allowed to remain, all the while, the owners of the plant face no retribution though it is unlawful to hire undocumented workers. It seems that white collar crime is indeed treated differently than another's unlawfulness.

Living and working in Northern Maine, I was witness to many immigrant laborers from Mexico who traveled thousands of miles to harvest broccoli during the summer only to return south in order to pick berries during the winter months. Hard work with long hours. Many immigrant families patronized our hair salon where they were treated with respect. I learned much through their patronage, especially in how all of them sent money home to help distant relatives survive. And many of these immigrant laborers knelt at the same altar rail on Sunday mornings as I did. They were good family-centered people of deep faith villainized for simply wanting a better life for their children.

And that is where reconciliation needs to start: at the altar rail. That is where we begin to be transformed into Christ's disciples. That is where the fire of baptism takes hold. I believe the altar rail is our great equalizer, where saint and sinner come along side-by-side. It is there that the inner wolf of negativity surrenders and the inner wolf of positivity is nourished. It is there, when we gather at the altar rail that we do so in the shadow of the cross, the ultimate symbol of God's redeeming grace and the implement of God's work in reconciling the world through Christ.

It is the cross that judges us; that exposes our broken and unjust systems. It is also the power of the cross to save us from ourselves. The cross is divisive, make no mistake about it for it compels us to act in accordance with God's message of love, repentance, and forgiveness. The cross compels us towards acts of kindness and generosity, not anger and envy. The cross compels the prophets among us to guide us into acts of resistance, to challenge and change unjust systems of oppression that favor the few at the expense of the many.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer sums it up this way: "The church's task is not simply to bind the wounds of the victim [crushed] beneath the wheel, but also to put a spoke in the wheel itself."

Isaiah could not have said it any better, and it is what the cross of Christ compels us towards. Disruptive behavior that causes division between the powerful and the disempowered. Disruptive behavior that transforms unjust systems into paradigms of peace and acceptance.

That is what both Isaiah and Jesus are speaking about: commitment to God means commitment to transforming societies and its varied unjust systems. Both, Isaiah and Jesus, are speaking of feeding the compassionate wolf within while acknowledging the angry wolf. Both, compassion and anger, coexist within each of us where the fire of baptism calms the anger while the Eucharist feeds the compassionate heart. It is my prayer today, that God's grace will so infuse us that we willingly seek to heal broken systems; that God's grace will equip us wisdom and foresight so that our lives, lived in the shadow of the cross, will expose the moral bankruptcy and social decay that surrounds and empower us to interrupt the injustice that proliferates throughout our nation.