

Rev. Gusti Linnea Newquist
“Divided We Stand”
August 14, 2022

*Based on *Luke 12:49-56. Jesus Brings Division.*

**translation below*

I should have known when I married a native Vermont country boy that I would get daily lessons in reading the climate. He will sniff the winter air and project snow in three days. He will flip the compost in April and announce a good season for tomatoes come August. And he will be right! The man is a walking weather vane! Way more accurate than the so-called experts at the Weather Channel.

My husband can read the climate because it has become his way of life: a rhythm of reciprocity grounded in respect for the elements; a humility in the face of forces beyond his immediate control. He works *with* the climate, as it is, not as he wishes it would be. Although, don't get me wrong, he has done his fair share of cursing the wind when it breaks down the berry-laden branches he has toiled over all summer!

How much better than even a native Vermonter in the 21st century must the crowd in our Lesson read their 1st century agrarian climate? Like my husband, it is just their way of life, as familiar to them as breathing. A cloud rises in the west, so they know it will rain. The south wind blows, so they know it will be hot. Why, Jesus demands to know, can they not read the *social* climate in the exact same way?!

To be clear, when it comes to the social climate of 1st century Judea, the clouds are brewing and the winds are blowing and the icebergs are melting and the sea levels are rising. Tensions are high throughout the land, armed guards patrol every corner of the region, revolutionary movements are fomenting, and factions are forming.

Jesus, himself, with his calling to proclaim *good news to the poor, release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, and liberty to the oppressed*, is well on his way to Jerusalem in this Lesson, ready to confront both religious and political corruption. A strong spiritual fitness - a baptismal flood of justice flowing with steadfast love - is required for Jesus to meet the moment, even as he admits he would prefer to simply cast a refining fire throughout the land to do the dirty work for him. As a result, according to the Lutheran scholar Patricia Lull, *Jesus has no patience with those who do not grasp the urgency of his pilgrimage 'to the very bowels of being.'* It has literally become, for him, life and death.

From now on, Jesus warns, as he approaches the path of no return, *five in one household will be divided*: fathers and sons, mothers and daughters - non-binary against non-binary, we might add in our 21st century parlance - and all of our in-laws. And boy, can we relate! We are as divided as it gets in the social climate of 21st century America and getting more so by the minute.

Emboldened hate groups no longer operate in secret shame but instead recruit the next generation through photo ops with elected officials. Christian nationalists no longer operate at the fringes in deference to the First Amendment but instead openly run for office on a platform of anti-semitism and intolerance for religious pluralism. Teaching the truth of our nation's racial history has become anathema to many, and even speaking the words *lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender* can get you fired as an educator in at least one state in this country.

We. Are. Truly. Divided. *And the days have daggers, says the poet, and the mirrors motives.*

Respected scholars, without hyperbole, are publicly naming our current social climate as comparable to the years leading up to the Civil War in the 1860s and to World War II in the 1940s. The deadly reaction to last week's FBI search and seizure of top secret documents stored in the home of a former president is but one sign of the current social climate. As *New York Times* columnist David Brooks laments, *It feels as though we're walking toward some sort of storm and there's no honorable way to alter our course.*

Jesus, himself, is no help, it turns out. Don't look to me to calm things down, he says. If you cannot read the social climate for what it is, it's because you just don't want to.

And then Jesus leaves us hanging, at least as the Lesson lands for us today. But the teaching to the crowd continues to the end of the chapter and beyond. The faithful response, Jesus says, to the sign of these divided times is fairly simple: a re-commitment to personal integrity. Not as a substitute for social justice and the vision of Beloved Community but as a *requisite* for social justice living into that vision.

Judge for yourselves what is right, Jesus tells the crowd. Don't wait for the social climate to get its ethical act together. Settle your disagreements in private, Jesus says. Don't go moaning and groaning in public about how you've been done wrong. Pay off your debts, Jesus says, literally and spiritually. And then turn around forgive the debts of others, as you wish had been done unto you.

Trust the promise, Jesus says, in the reading of scholar Audrey West, that *when division begins, the gospel has begun to break in us and among us*. Live like leaven in the loaf, Jesus says, so that the reign of God can rise through the cracks. Hold on to faith the size of a mustard seed, Jesus says, and your conversion to the trees will grow strong and sturdy and serve the birds of the air who make their nests in your branches.

Easier said than done, I know.

It is only natural, I suppose - and I think Jesus, in his heart of hearts would agree - for us to simply wish away the divisions that threaten the very fabric of life as we know it. But the truth is those divisions have been with us all along. We have never truly, honestly, openly, acknowledged and repaired the original sins of racism and genocide that make our lives possible on this land in this moment. Every time we get close, a fierce backlash ensues, which is what I think is happening in our culture in this moment.

In our Lesson, as well, the Roman Empire never truly, honestly, openly acknowledges and repairs their original sin of violent oppression in the land of Judea. Neither do the Judeans, themselves, ever truly, honestly, openly acknowledge and repair their original sin of idolatry and injustice and yes, even genocide, in their own land of promise and plenty.

Neither does wishing away our divisions save the life and sanity of a ten year old rape victim who cannot access essential health care in her home state. Wishing away our divisions does not shore up the freedom to marry for the LGBTQIA+ community. Wishing away our divisions does not free our children from the steady threat of trying to survive yet another school shooting. Wishing away our divisions does not save our teetering democracy. Wishing away our division does not even rescue our own family's annual attempts at a holiday.

Some things are so important that we have to take a stand, even *into* the division, so help us God, because with integrity we can do no other. That is what we try do here at SPC, in our own fumbling mumbling way, with humility always, with courageous conviction when we can conjure it, open to correction, listening deeply for the guidance of the Spirit.

The only way to truly heal our divisions, I think Jesus is trying to say in this Lesson from Luke, is to face them head on, with the same spirit of never-quitting, never-failing, always devoted, persistent steadfast *hesed* love that is the very heart of God. And the only way to do that, I think Jesus is trying to say in this Lesson from Luke, is to look honestly in the mirror. To admit the motives at the heart of the dagger-wielding divided self that is within each one of us. To tend those parts of ourselves we really would rather not see. To love, love, love that divided self-image with all of our heart and our mind and our soul and our strength.

When we do that, then maybe, just maybe, we really can turn to our neighbor - who might turn out to be our father or our mother or our son or our daughter, divided as divided can be - and love them the same way we have learned to love ourselves. And maybe, just maybe, we really can become one people, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.

In the meantime, as we discern together how to stand into the division, we do well to adopt the posture of my beloved husband, the native Vermont weather-vane. We do well to adopt a rhythm of reciprocity with our social climate, grounded in respect for its impact on us and our impact on it. We do well to adopt a posture of humility in the face of forces beyond our immediate control. We do well to begin working *with* our social climate, as it *is*, and not how we wish it would be. Praying always for that Beloved Community, with its more just and sustainable unity, in the peace that passes all understanding.

We may fail to establish that peace in its fullness. We may fail to bring about the Beloved Community in our lifetimes. We have no idea what the next week will look like, let alone the next decade. It could get a whole lot worse before it gets even a little better.

But if we fail, let it be the way Jesus failed: devoted to our divine calling of Radical Hospitality, Holistic Spirituality and Engaged Compassion; with a strong spiritual fitness - a baptismal flood of justice mixed with

steadfast *hesed* love flowing through us - preparing us to meet the moment, even as we admit we would rather not have to; and with the promise of a glorious resurrection on the other side of whatever comes next.

Let the church say, Amen!

Luke 12:49-56

Jesus says to Peter,

“Fire I came to cast upon the earth,
and how I wish it were already kindled!

Baptismal waters, however, must flood through me,
like a compulsion,
until my baptism is made complete.

Do you think that I have come to bring peace on earth?
No, I tell you, but rather division!

From now on five in one household will be divided,
three against two and two against three;

they will be divided:
father against son and son against father,
mother against daughter and daughter against mother,
mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law
and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law.”

Jesus also says to the crowds,

“When you see a cloud rising in the west,
you immediately say,
‘It is going to rain’;
and so it happens.

And when you see the south wind blowing,
you say,
‘There will be scorching heat’:
and it happens.

Hello?! Are you playing dumb?

You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky,
but you think you cannot interpret this *kairos* moment?!”