

“A Change or the Weather”

Luke 12:49-56

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Jesus has me right on target. One of the reasons I moved back to the Midwest was because I missed the sky. I love watching storms move in, seeing the sunrise and the sunset, and trying to figure out what different clouds look like. I don't just like looking at the sky, though. I have the National Weather Service web site as the homepage on my computer, and I check it several times a day. One could say I'm a bit obsessive about it. Granted, it makes sense to check the weather in the morning so I can dress appropriately. Also, it is understandable that I am concerned about hazardous weather and want to know when it's coming. Still, Jesus has me pegged. “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. 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?”

I don't need to check the National Weather Service web site five times a day. If I am hot, I can do something about it. If I am cold, I can do something about it. I don't have to know the precise temperature outside in order to make myself comfortable. However, like many Americans it has become an obsession. I know people who watch the Weather Channel incessantly. Our local meteorologists are perhaps better known to us than any of the other news anchors. What do we do when we want to make casual conversation? We talk about the weather.

We are, indeed, good at interpreting “the clouds in the sky,” and we can predict the “scorching heat.” When we're not quite sure, we turn to those “prophets” on the Weather Channel to interpret the “signs” for us. Yet, as Jesus said, we “do not know how to interpret the present time.” We would rather talk about the weather than what really matters.

There is nothing we can do about the weather. If we pay attention to the present time, it will require us to act. If we pay attention to the present time, if we work at interpreting what is going on around us rather than just what is falling from the sky, we will be thrown into turmoil. We will see the injustices around us. We will know that Jesus' call to love the poor and oppressed is being ignored, even by those who tout “family values.” We will not know peace. We will know worry and questioning and hard work. We will be forced to become “warriors for peace.” Our lives will be turned upside down.

When Jesus said, “I came not to bring peace to the earth, but rather division,” he was not talking about war as we know it today. He was not talking about the war in Iraq, with its news of soldiers dead in roadside bombings and of the brutal killing of civilians. He was not talking about Vietnam or Korea or World War II or any of the other wars we may have known in our lifetime. Indeed, I believe Jesus would be sickened by our penchant for killing one another. First century Palestine was a far from peaceful place, but over the past two millennia we have perfected our killing technology. We know how to destroy the whole world with a nuclear

bomb. One cannot get more violent than wanting to know how to terminate God's Creation.

While these things go on around us we sit placidly on our front porch and talk about the weather. "Sure gonna be a hot one today!" we say, as yet another person is killed in Iraq or Afghanistan. "I wish it weren't so humid!" we cry, as yet another AIDS orphan starves in Africa. "Well, looks like rain today!" we say, as a teenager deals drugs for the first time in our own neighborhood -- and yes, it happens in small-town Minnesota, not just the inner city.

We prefer not to think about those things, and for good reason. Maybe we care about what is coming from the sky because some of us believe that is where heaven is, but I doubt that is our reason. Much more likely is the possibility that we simply don't want to know. I count myself in that crowd. I read the news feverishly, but I sometimes skip the stories about yet another bombing in Baghdad, because it's just more of the same, day after day. It's too depressing. Never mind that human lives, created in the image of God, Iraqi and American and otherwise, have just been snuffed out. Never mind that our embargoes against certain countries cause people to starve while achieving few, if any, political goals. Never mind that yet another child is being assaulted. Never mind that humankind -- yes, people of faith -- would rather kill one another than interpret the Word of the God who created us.

Yet, here we are. Here we are in this world filled with so much pain. The "division" that we find is not the "division" of which Jesus spoke, that tied into the then-controversial decision to be baptized. Instead, our division is caused by us turning our backs on God or, for those who are not believers, turning our backs on The Good. Our division is caused by a breakdown of our God-given goodness, a decline into evil or simply laziness. We would rather talk about the weather than what matters.

So, what of that "division" within households, of which Jesus spoke? What of that "father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother"? In this day and age we certainly know about broken homes. More than half of marriages end in divorce in this country, and turmoil between spouses, their children, and extended families runs rampant. But Jesus is not preaching about the demise of the modern family.

In Jesus' day the Christian initiation rite of baptism was controversial because it was new and, as is almost always true, a conversion to a new religion results in turmoil amongst loved ones. Also, the realm of God about which Jesus preached was different from the hierarchical system of the Roman world, in which a "family" patriarch ruled the roost. Jesus preached a new kind of equality that upset the traditional family system completely. By choosing to be baptized (keep in mind that people were always baptized as adults in the early years of the Church), one was committing an act of defiance against the established order.

Today, choosing to become a Christian is much less controversial. While we certainly celebrate when someone chooses to join the church, they will likely not leave their daily life behind entirely. They will still, like the rest of us, talk about the weather.

What, then, does it mean to be a Christian in this day and age? What does it mean to "be divided," in Jesus' meaning of the phrase, in our 21st century world? It means being willing to upset the apple cart once again by truly saying what we believe. It may, indeed, cause divisions within our very families, within our community of acquaintances, within our little world. Feelings about the war in Iraq are heated on all sides. Talk of the environment remains controversial. The AIDS crisis in Africa saddens most, but we have different ways of dealing with it. If we are, indeed, to stop talking about the weather we must say what we truly believe about such things and we must do something about these things, even if doing so throws our

lives into turmoil. The Spirit will lead us to different conclusions -- good Christians have different beliefs on many topics. But we will be interpreting the scriptures in a spirit of prayer and acting on our care-filled interpretations. We will not know peace. But at least we will stop praying "Dear God, we pray for world peace" without doing anything about it. We will be authentic in our care for God's Word and God's world. We will learn to love one another so deeply that the divisions caused by our passions will not matter. And our prayers will have deep meaning rather than being flippant words just tossed into the sky.

Now let us pray.