

Scripture Readings:  
Hebrews 11:29-12:2  
Luke 12:49-56

## Witness to Faith

So here's the thing I love Jesus. I've committed my life to following him (although very imperfectly). When I make big life decisions Jesus and my faith are always a part of the equation. I have what some would call a high Christology. I embrace his call to love God and neighbour. I just wish the Gospel writers and lectionary selection team would leave out passages like the one chosen for today. I much prefer a theology of inclusion that seeks to build bridges. I'm an ecumenist and bridge builder to the very depths of my soul. So I don't like this reading, because Jesus speaks here in apocalyptic terms of setting the world ablaze, and bringing division within the land even division within the family. I want a message of peace and love, but in this passage Jesus reveals that this is not in the cards. I realize that there are preachers who embrace a message of division and destruction, but that's not the message I choose to preach and I know I'm not alone. It's not the message I choose to preach because I don't believe it is at the core of who Jesus is or who God desires us to be.

That being said I had a huge urge to skip this reading altogether - I'm not sure why there are all these heavy readings in these summer months when we are supposed to be basking in the sun, having fun and resting up but let's be honest the struggles of life don't stop because the sun is shining so I guess we will carry on with being honest and not trying to pretend life is all rainbows and butterflies.

When I look at passages like this I want to say something like "I think Jesus was having a bad day." Most likely he was. Contextually Jesus is heading toward Jerusalem and his final confrontation with the powers—both religious and political (in the first century religion and politics were not easily separated). If you read Luke 12, you'll find that it is filled with words of warning. Don't be greedy. Don't worry. Be on the alert. Jesus wants to set his disciples on the right path, and is inviting them to stay with him as he traverses it. That's where the message of division comes in. If you choose to follow Jesus you will put yourself on a collision course with family and friends, as well as the powers that be. Rejection is almost certain to happen.

Choosing to follow Jesus in the first century wasn't an easy decision. Jesus' message was all about loyalty to the God of Israel, and that put him at odds with Roman society. Or more specifically, it put early Christians in a difficult spot as the message of Jesus moved out of a Jewish context into a Gentile one. So the first level of conflict would have been within the Jewish community. Would Jesus' fellow Jews accept him and his message as the defining message of Judaism? Moving into Luke's context, among Gentiles, things took another turn toward separation from society. It's important to understand Roman culture. They were religious pluralists, who welcomed any and all gods, as long as you accepted Rome's gods. The Romans

built a Temple in Rome called the Pantheon, which enshrined this variety of divinities. Jews were different, of course, they were religious exclusivists, but Rome let them off the hook, because they were perceived to be a small ethnicity with their own peculiarities. Rome didn't concern itself too much with Christians as long as they stayed within Jewish bounds. They were perceived to be a Jewish sect, and thus contained. Once the message of Jesus moved out from that context and began to spread among Gentiles with the ministry of Paul, things changed. Paul's message was not one of go along to get along, at least on a religious level. That made Rome nervous.

As I read the passage in today's context I can't help but think of the political realms of the day. I think of the American context, where Christianity remains dominant, though it's hold on society is eroding quickly, separation from culture takes on a different mode. There are those who wish to reclaim the nation for Jesus, so that Christianity can set the agenda. (I might say so that "their version of Christianity can set the agenda") There are others who would want to withdraw, and leave the nation to its devices. Still others, want to make a difference without imposing a religious orthodoxy on the nation. This brings us to the question of allegiance. If we choose Jesus will that put us at odds with others? Will it cause division within the Christian community, as we sort out exactly what stands at the centre of the Christian faith and practice. Is Jesus calling us to rule, to separate out and create an alternative community, or simply work for a better community where all, whether Christian or not can flourish? My belief is the later. I honestly think that is exactly what Jesus is calling us to. I am committed to following the lead of the Prophets who called on the people of Israel to care for their neighbours. Love, justice, mercy and grace are the foundations of faith.

This brings me to our passage from Hebrews. "Some of you may remember the movie "Dead Poets Society." The movie stars the amazingly talented late Robin Williams. Williams played John Keating, a high school English teacher at an all-boys private academy, who is committed to helping his students take advantage of life's opportunities.

There is a compelling scene in the movie when Keating leads his class out into the foyer of the building where old photographs of graduating classes from decades past cover the walls. As the boys study the portraits of the classes who had graduated generations before them, Keating remarks that the men in those pictures were just like them, full of hope and ambition. Then Keating asks his class, "Did they wait till it was too late to realize their full potential?" Then he tells the class that if they lean in close they can hear a message from the men in these pictures. So they lean in and Keating whispers, "Carpe Diem. Carpe Diem. Seize the day, boys. Make your lives extraordinary."

When I read Hebrews 11, I feel a bit like one of the boys in Keating's class. Except in this case, the writer of Hebrews is my teacher, and he is taking me on a field trip through the "Hall of Faith." I see portraits of Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Moses, David and Samson. I learn about the heroes of the faith and the extraordinary things they did for God. As I take in this inspiring tour, it's as if these heroes are calling out to me, "Carpe Diem! Seize the day. Make your life extraordinary for God!"

One can't help but be inspired by this text. It is a call for us to continue to fight the good fight of the gospel. The winning witness of our heroes stirs us to persevere. Their stories remind us that we are not the first ones to run the race of faith. Faithful saints before us have run the same race, fought fatigue, battled discouragement and won!

So, how do we run to win? How do we press on to victory? How do we move triumphantly to the finish line of discipleship? The writer of Hebrews is very specific about how we are to run to win. ”<sup>1</sup>

The first thing the writer says is to lay aside the weight of sin. We've picked up bad habits and sins along the way. We know they weigh us down. We know they are bad for us. We know they complicate things. We know they keep us from running the race of faith swiftly, but we still hang on to them. And it is causing many of us to lose the race of faith. If we would throw it aside, we would run much faster. But too often, we do not take the weight of sin seriously enough to do anything about it, and we continue to run at a loser's pace.

It is not very popular to preach about sin anymore. Several years ago, Karl Meninger wrote a book entitled, *Whatever Became of Sin?* Right, whatever did become of it? Sin is hardly ever mentioned anymore, (well at least not in mainline churches) but it remains the most dangerous threat to our spiritual lives. We can't win the race of discipleship if we are spiritually dead!

I honestly think our churches unknowingly, unintentionally are filled with sin. Different churches have different issues, different Christians have different sins but sin is when we lose sight of God when we lose focus of faith. When we start following our own way rather than God's way.

“In our post-modern age, many see the church as just another thing to be consumed--a big spiritual buffet where you can grab what you want and leave what you don't without the hassle of commitment or sacrifice. Others see the church as a luxury cruise liner offering free entertainment and programs to meet every need without questioning the validity of those needs. The church is not a cruise liner. The church is more like a battleship battling evil. The church is a supply ship filled with disciples giving aid to the needy and transforming the world with the love of Christ. The church's purpose is to equip and deploy disciples of Christ to spread the gospel of Christ. When did we lose sight of that? If we want to run the race to win, we must lay aside the weight of sin that is distracting the church from its mission...

The writer of Hebrews does an inspiring job motivating us to persevere, to finish the race of discipleship. Hebrews 12:1 says, "Since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses." Imagine being at the centre of a huge stadium, running feverishly around the track and the whole crowd are saints--thousands of them, and they are all screaming your name. You see Paul holding up a banner with your name on it. You see Abraham and Moses high fiving, chanting your name. I don't know about you, but that motivates me."<sup>2</sup> It reminds me that I am not alone and it reminds me of the greater purpose. The last thing the writer of Hebrews says is we must look to Jesus.

---

<sup>1</sup> [http://day1.org/2111-postcard\\_from\\_heaven](http://day1.org/2111-postcard_from_heaven)

<sup>2</sup> IBID

So what are we as Christians racing towards? What is our goal? What is our finish line? It is Jesus. Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith. Jesus, the Prince of peace. Jesus, Emmanuel, God with us. Our goal is to be like Jesus. Flawed as we are, that is what we strive for.

In Luke 12 Jesus declares “I came to cast fire upon the earth.” In fact, Jesus wishes the world were already set ablaze. These are scary words but there is something important in these words. They offer us an eschatological reminder that we need to keep our eyes open. I have found myself in more and more conversations in the last year about what I believe is the call of Jesus and our faith. I have found myself disagreeing adamantly with things that are happening in our world in the name of God and Jesus. I know I have family members and members of the Squamish community that don’t think I am following Jesus and I can assure you I am doing my very best to do so in all faithfulness. So I get the division Jesus speaks of and I get the religious and political division of Jesus’ day although here in Canada I am not likely to die for my beliefs but in other places I still could. See I as a follower of Jesus believe that Jesus welcomes everyone, doesn’t see anyone as unloveable no matter their race, religion, economic status, sexual orientation, or anything. Jesus wants to love and welcome. No matter our mistakes, no matter our sins (which by the way we all have them) no matter what, we are called to love and grace and justice and abundance for all. Full stop. That’s it. That’s the story. That’s the truth. We make a whole lot of other rules and regulations and stipulations and judgements but all of those things are actually up to God and not us. We have to stop trying to play God.

Jesus says we turn to the weather report so we can plan our futures. When going on a vacation I check the weather to decide how to pack. Weather can be tricky to predict, but there are hints to follow. Jesus wants us to be checking the weather. He wants us to be alert to the realities around us. What are the challenges facing us as his followers? Giving allegiance to Jesus may create and require some challenges, so standing up for justice and truth that others don’t see. Jesus might set things ablaze, but it is not our job to do so! Unless it is in the fight for love and justice. Consider the message offered to us carefully, so that we might stand firm in our faith, but seek peace as well. This is probably a very important caveat to be heard at time when the world’s political situation is extremely volatile. Let us fight for love and not be the ones to fan the flames of division and power. Seek justice, love mercy and walk humbly with our lord.

May we so live.

Amen.

Franciscan Benediction

“May God bless you with discomfort at easy answers, half truths, and superficial relationships, so that you may live deep within your heart.

May God bless you with anger at injustice, oppression, and exploitation of people, so that you may work for justice, freedom and peace.

May God bless you with tears to shed for those who suffer from pain, rejection, starvation, and war, so that you may reach out your hand to comfort them and to turn their pain in to joy.

And may God bless you with enough foolishness to believe that you can make a difference in this world, so that you can do what others claim cannot be done. To bring justice and kindness to all our children and the poor.

Amen.”