

At the end of my second year at Knox College, I was invited by my Theology professor to help present a paper at the annual meeting of the Canadian Theological Society. I jumped at the opportunity - because I really loved working with this professor and because I wanted a closer look at the academic side of theological studies (I was still entertaining the notion that I could become a professional student - I really REALLY enjoyed my return to university!)

So off we went, on a weekend in May, to the campus of the U of Manitoba. I imagined an extension of my seminary experience: people asking interesting questions and eagerly soaking up ideas and influences - really taking advantage of the chance to share and learn and grow. What happened was I came home exhausted (the trip lasted just three days) and certain that I would never pursue an advanced degree in Theology.

You see, I didn't know about the pressure to publish; nor of the strings attached to academic tenure that ran through such conventions as the one we attended. I couldn't have imagined that the presentations would be (with two exceptions) about such useless propositions as re-naming God (so the term would not be so loaded with negative male-dominated imagery - the suggestion was the word GODE) or other variations of the ancient "how many angels can dance on the head of a pin" question. My expectations met up with a reality I found difficult to comprehend. At least our presentation went reasonably well.

I was freshly reminded of the clash between my expectations of "real academia" and the desperate dog-and-pony show that was the 2004 meeting of the society as I tried to wrap my head around Jesus' declaration of the fiery division that he promises here in Luke chapter 12.

The set up for this morning's selection is a series of monologues on expectation: if the owner of the house had known the robbers were coming, he would not have been robbed. If the servants knew when the master was returning, they would not have behaved so badly (Luke 12:35-48). Jesus' words carry more than a little frustration, and there is enough for everyone - not just his immediate audience, but all who will follow.

Hypocrites, he calls them - those who spout off about meteorological trends while being ignorant of the chaos that is swirling around them. Something bigger than a rainstorm is brewing. This is the desert equivalent of 'you [all] can't see the forest for the trees'.

It is also alarming that the one heralded as the Prince of Peace declares division to be part of the package; mother against daughter, father against son, mother-in-law against daughter-in-law. This has the feel of both proverb and prophecy. A generational divide within family dynamics is not unusual, and Jesus here suggests that the kingdom he proclaims will disturb people along these well-worn paths. New ideas challenge the status quo, and how do younger generations react to "the way we've always done things...?" They speak out; they ask uncomfortable questions; they look to leave their own mark and change the world..'

So - let's review: The peace that Jesus brings is no peace...he longs for fire to be kindled, in fact - a disruptive, refining event designed to change the world. And his audience is so badly blinded by things they're sure they know, that they are unable to see this change taking place. This is the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ...

Jesus has identified something that we now describe as 'observational bias'; a term that describes the human tendency to defend personal knowledge as universal truth (even when the facts suggest that our personal knowledge is wrong.). Humans create narratives that explain difficult situations in a way that provide comfort - our truth becomes THE TRUTH (see any collection of letters to the editor for confirmation of how this works and how often it happens...). Jesus calls this hypocrisy (as does Jeremiah, by the way) especially when it comes from those who would call themselves children of God.

All of these difficult suggestions - the fire, the division, the hypocrisy - often frighten us into thinking that Jesus is forcing us to choose. Elsewhere that choice seems to be confirmed (Luke 14:26 - "Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple. ") but I think what Jesus is doing is

reminding us of the necessity to change and grow. Life is dynamic and relationships are too. Why would the reign of God be any different?

Jesus words and actions bring everyone's "God expectations" out into the open, and (for the most part) push them aside. All is not as it seems with Jesus, and all that we have come to believe about who God is and how God works is NOT as it seems either.

My encounter with what people playfully call "The Learned" back in 2004 taught me that my idealized notions of academic society were useless. Too often, such organizations are driven by a single purpose (covered by the phrase 'publish or perish' -the result being some very strange ideas are proposed and defended). Good CAN come, there are benefits to the work being done by people in pursuit of Ph.d's - but to find it you must sift through a fair bit of chaff...

The same thing happens in the working church - in denominations and local congregations whose survival seems threatened because of a lack of resources or a lack of interest. Such places become dangerously single minded; their truths become distorted; their purpose, muddled. They fight for (and about) the wrong things. They see a cloud rising in the west, and say, "It is going to rain"; and so it happens. And when the south wind blows -"There will be scorching heat"; and it happens. they know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but do you not know how to interpret the present time?

Jesus frustrated declaration is a plea for observation and curiosity. We are invited (in the spirit of the metaphor) to see the forest AND the trees - the weather and the climate - the political necessity and the compassionate alternative. Jesus invites us to see, love and live more broadly in response to the broad vision, boundless love and abundant life that are promised by God.