

You Don't Have to Be a Genius
Psalm 139:1-12, 23-24
Luke 12:49-59
Fort Hill Presbyterian Church
August 14, 2016

It is that time of year when college students fill the parking spaces in town, and traffic gets backed up, and faculty and staff at the university get back in the groove of teaching and tutoring and advising and testing, and all manner of things in higher education gets into gear. All of this activity is predicated on decisions. For the student a decision is made to matriculate—to sign the dotted line of commitment, but in all reality, that's only a piece of paper. As many professors will confess, "The real commitment comes when you show up for class and continue to do so pass the Drop/Add date."

This gospel for us today is from Jesus as he heads to Jerusalem for his Drop/Add date. He is stressed no doubt and even says so. He is on his way to Jerusalem with his disciples and along the way he stops to speak to crowds. In Luke's gospel just this chapter alone Jesus has talked about fear and judgment, two court scenes, material possessions, the futility of worry, watchfulness of masters and slaves, and now he comes to speak about division caused by decision. No wonder he is stressed. He is trying to cover all the bases giving advice to his followers, his disciples, and those he meets along the way. He says he has come to bring fire and division. This does not sound like the "Sunday School Jesus" we like best. This Jesus sounds scary, but if we remember what the prophets Simeon and John the Baptist said about him, it makes perfect sense. When the people were asking John if he was the Messiah, John replied by saying,

"I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. 17 His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire." (Luke 3:15-17)

And Simeon upon holding the Christ child spoke these words.

34 Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary, "This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign

that will be opposed 35so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed-- and a sword will pierce your own soul too." (Luke 2:34-35) We have this human tendency to remember the good news and suppress the difficult words about Jesus' baptizing with fire and causing the falling of many in Israel and becoming a sign that will be opposed. But it does happen and here along the road to Jerusalem he reminds everyone that the time is drawing near. He is stressed to complete his baptism which involves first dying before rising, his mission which includes opposition, to get to the point where he can say, "It is finished." His coming trial, crucifixion, and death show us that Jesus is fully committed. His resurrection proves that he continues to show up for our own good because he is goodness and mercy.

As Jesus speaks about division in families we may not want to hear such, but it is true. Take for example how standing up for one's belief in God changed the relationship between Francis of Assisi and his father Peter Bernardone. Francis worked in his father's fabric store selling bolts of cloth. Francis either gave away the cloth or used the money from purchases to restore broken down churches. His father brought Francis to trial before the bishop. Francis told the bishop, "My lord, I will gladly give back to my father not only the money acquired from his things, but even all my clothes." With that Francis stripped naked, and handed over the money and his clothes. Francis then spoke to the crowd and disavowed his own father by saying, "from now on I want only to say 'Our Father, Who art in heaven,' and not, 'My father, Peter Bernadone.'"¹

Francis went the way of many who become priests, pastors, and servants in the church. How hard it is for parents to give over their children to God. But sometimes it is the other way too. I can think of many parents and grandparents who have asked me to pray for their children and grandchildren to turn to God in faith and live upon that decision.

Years ago when I served another congregation and was preparing for a confirmation retreat to Montreat, a mother came to me with deep concern for the dilemma that she found her daughter in—the confirmation retreat and a football game where her daughter was a cheerleader were on the same date. The mother had spoken to the cheerleading coach and was informed that if her daughter missed the game she would be removed from the squad. She had made a commitment to the squad and needed to keep it. The daughter saw no problem with that. The mother,

however, was distressed that something which was temporary—being a cheerleader could hold such power over her daughter’s faith life. The mother saw the confirmation retreat as embarking on a life-long faith experience, a priority that she wanted to pass down to her daughter. The mother asked for my advice. We discussed how ironic it is that faith is free, but it comes at a price. We prayed that God might reveal a way that her daughter would not be punished for going on the confirmation retreat. In his commentary on the Gospel of Luke, Alan R. Culpepper says, “Those who commit themselves to Jesus must prepare for the opposition they will face, even from their own families.”² A few days later, the mother called me and told me what she had done. She told me that her daughter was furious with her for signing her up for the confirmation retreat and essentially getting her kicked off the cheerleading squad. How would her daughter come to understand that this was for her own spiritual good?

The mother, who was an elementary school teacher, shared her concern with the middle school principal. He suggested she take it to the school board. And she did. The next week the mother spoke before the school board about the educational value of the confirmation retreat and their family’s value of religion. The board ruled that the daughter would not be kicked off the football cheerleading squad, but moved to the basketball cheerleading squad instead. It was a compromise, but the daughter was still mad as a hornet at her mother.

This division of daughter against mother went on even up to the day we left for Montreat. It was all over the daughter’s face, she looked like she could eat nails, she was so mad. The mother’s countenance was radiant, though. She rested in the assurance she had done the right thing and now it was up to God to do the rest. I got in the van with the advisors and the youth and we drove the three hours to Montreat, with this angry teenager not only hating her mother, but also me as an accomplice by prayer and conversation.

But God did do the rest and that young girl’s heart softened as other youth talked about their lives and asked about hers. They listened as she poured out her anger and sat with her in her grief over the cheerleading. They helped her realize that her mother’s love stood up for her daughter to still be a cheerleader and not be kicked off the squad all together. We did the rest of the usual things that confirmation retreats are good for

like playing games, taking walks, reading the Bible, watching “Places in the Heart,” and discussing life filled with tragedy, sin, forgiveness, grace, communion, and love. We did life together that weekend and by the time we drove three hours back home, the daughter was a different person and so were the rest of us. Together we were the body of Christ.

The psalmist tells us that God knows everything there is to know about us, even every thought and every word before we speak it. God knew what transformation would take place in our lives on that retreat. God knows what transformation will take place in our lives here together at Fort Hill. The opportunities are here too, but they may also require some sacrifice on our parts. I know that the things that truly matter in my life involve some kind of commitment or sacrifice on my part. When we think our lives are too busy to squeeze in church and we want to make room, but can't see a way forward. That's when we need to remember that even in the darkness we are not alone, where God is, there is no darkness, only light.

Jesus tells us that we know the weather better than we know God. He calls the crowd “Hypocrites” or “Frauds” - people who hide behind masks to play a role. Jesus wants us to have integrity instead of masks. This echoes back a few chapters in Luke to something that theologian Peter Rhea Jones calls “practical atheism” in reference to the rich young fool —“I have always believed in God,” but when it comes to managing his life, dealing with possessions and planning for the future, he lives as if there were no God and it all depended upon him. So what difference should our faith in God make in the practical matters of life? If we are wearing masks, then our faith matters not at all.

I like how Eugene Peterson writes about this in *The Message*. He says, “You don't have to be a genius to understand these things. Just use your common sense...” (Luke 12:57) People know how to read the weather because they pay attention to it, they watch the forecast, they study the clouds. Energy of time, space, and matter go into understanding the weather. What Luke wants us to think about is “How much energy of time, space, and matter do we give to understanding God?”

The Olympics are on non-stop right now and the stories of how each athlete decided to play a sport has little value unless there is also a determinism, a commitment to practice, and practice, and practice to

become better than the day before, to learn from one's mistakes in form or function, to grow by sacrificing something else in life in order to learn his or her sport to their very best. It is like the swimmer becomes a part of the water and the runner becomes a part of the track and the gymnast becomes a part of the apparatus because they know the sport that well.

The Christian life can be like that for us. When we profess our faith in Jesus Christ we make a decision to be a Christ-follower—a disciple. We choose to get to know God in Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit. And we do it in community, not just any community but a faith community.

- When we choose to come to worship we begin the process of learning how Jesus is holy and calls us to be holy too. When one of us is absent from the body or community of faith being holy becomes more difficult for us all.
- When we choose to be a part of a Bible study or small group or Bridge group or youth group we begin to grow in our knowledge of God, learning how Jesus is God and is human like us, and learning to talk about Jesus here, at home, and in other places. We gain a voice of faith.
- When we gather at table together on Wednesday nights and Dinners for 8 we learn how breaking bread is about more than just filling our bellies, but it is also about filling our souls with the lives of the people of God, people that God created and gives us for our faith journey together.
- When we serve through Family Promise or collect food for Clemson Community Cares or provide aid or vision in El Faro, or serve as an elder or deacon, we are reminded of Jesus putting a little child in the midst of the people, of Jesus blessing the loaves and fishes a little boy shares, of Jesus spitting in mud to make a blind man see.
- When we do these Christ-like behaviors together we strengthen one another as the Body of Christ. When we are absent one from the other our witness of God's incredible power is diminished in us.

Now it's division time....

Who has made a decision to attend as many CU football games as you can this season?

Who has made a decision to attend as many worship services as you can this God-season?

We are in the present time—the Kairos—God’s time. David Lamotte has a song titled “Deadline” that says there is “no time like the present, no present like time.”

I challenge you to glorify and enjoy God, study God’s word, pray for one another, and serve the least, the lost, and the lonely as much as you enjoy football this season.

Culpepper reminds us that “Jesus’ sayings challenge us to examine the inconsistencies between attention and neglect in our own lives, but the underlying challenge is to consider whether these inconsistencies reveal a pattern of prioritizing the insignificant while jeopardizing the things of greatest value and importance....”³ How are you spending your time? I know the stress you are under. I visit with you. I pray with and for you. And you visit me and pray with and for me. I have to wonder what we are doing to ourselves. Are we making decisions that are committing our lives to stress or to Christ? Are we digging deeper into the pit or deeper into the Word of God? Are we isolating ourselves more or opening ourselves unto God and God’s people? Are we prioritizing God space in our lives or prioritizing our lives in God’s space?

The Kingdom of God is about reconciliation and peace which is unifying. But announcing the kingdom of God is about decision which is discipleship and discipleship causes division—even crowds should interpret the God-signs and settle accounts with creditors. Jesus announces the coming kingdom seeking decision for him or against him—a divisive choice, and he seeks commitment to follow through. After he first identified Jesus as the Messiah, John the Baptist gives us an idea of what we should do next. “He, the Christ, must increase, but I must decrease.” (John 3:30) My friends, “you don’t have to be a genius to understand that. Just use your common sense.”

Let us pray. O Holy God, redeem our time, sanctify our space, and transform our material reality⁴ so that we might decrease in the presence of your increase. Allelujah! May it be so!

¹ Spoto, Donald, *Reluctant Saint: The Life of Francis of Assisi* (New York: Penguin, 2003), 53.

² Culpepper, Alan R. "The Gospel of Luke" in *The New Interpreter's Bible—A Commentary in Twelve Volumes, Vol. IX*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 267.

³ Culpepper, 269.

⁴ Redeem time, sanctify space, transform material reality. (*Book of Order*, W-1.3040)