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Colorado Springs, Colorado
March 25, 2012
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Questions Jesus Asked: Order or Chaos?

(Luke 12:49-56 NRSV) [Jesus said:] "I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! 50 I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what stress I am under until it is completed! 51 Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division! 52 From now on five in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three; 53 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." 54 He also said to the crowds, "When you see a cloud rising in the west, you immediately say, 'It is going to rain'; and so it happens. 55 And when you see the south wind blowing, you say, 'There will be scorching heat'; and it happens. 56 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?"

And Jesus said: "I came to bring fire to the earth.... Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No.... From now on five in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three.... " Well, that was a pretty unpleasant scripture, wasn't it? This isn't the portrait of Jesus we tend to think about or *want* to think about, is it? We understandably prefer the Jesus who gathered the children to him, the Jesus who so ached for his people and for Jerusalem that he expressed the wish that he could take them under his wing like a mother hen, the Jesus who wept at the news of his friend Lazarus' death, the Jesus who speaks of tenderly leading his flock like a shepherd cares for his sheep, and on and on. **That's** the Jesus we understandably – and rightly – hold close and take comfort from, particularly when life is hard or hurtful. But today's scripture is not one of those comforting ones, is it? It's certainly one that you will never see on a needle-pointed dishtowel: "*I have not come to bring peace ... [but] division.*" Or as one minister put it, you won't find these verses "on many refrigerator doors or on greeting cards. It's not a verse we encourage our children

to memorize.”¹ Nor will you find any of the folks who are inclined to talk about returning to the “family values” of the Bible quoting **these** words of Jesus: *“From now on... [those] in one household will be divided.”* Yes, pretty unpleasant stuff, isn’t it? And you may be thinking in your own minds, *“Well, you know, if I had wanted news of conflict and division, I could have just stayed home and turned on CNN, or opened the newspaper; I didn’t need to come to church to hear **that!**”*

So what do we do with this passage, these seemingly oh-so-harsh words of Jesus? How do we understand it in the context of the church in Luke’s time in the late first century. What did it mean for the Christians in Luke’s day. And most importantly for our own lives, what can we learn from this unsettling and disturbing passage? Well, to begin to answer those questions, let me say a little about what the time was like in which Luke was writing his Gospel. Most mainstream scholars believe that Luke wrote his gospel around the year 80, almost half a century after Jesus’ earthly ministry. What was happening in that decade? Well, persecutions under the Roman Emperor had been going on and had been especially intense. The Empire also had destroyed the Jewish Temple at Jerusalem, sacked the city, and this provoked a huge crisis of faith among both Christians and Jews. For, remember, as I’ve shared with you before, it would not be at all inaccurate to label those first Christians in Jerusalem as in fact “Jewish-Christians.” For the evidence is that Peter and his successors and his flock considered themselves Jews who believed that Jesus had been the Messiah. They continued to worship at the Temple. But now with the Temple gone, with Rome persecuting both Christians and Jews, there began that sad history of animosity between Jews and Christians. Things got said by both sides that hurt. And we all know that family fights can be the worst kind sometimes.

With that context in mind, part of what Luke is doing in passing these words of

¹Brian P. Stoffregen, <http://www.crossmarks.com/brian/luke12x49.htm>

Jesus along is, oddly and paradoxically, trying to comfort and *reassure* his flock. In one sense, the words of Jesus – now recalled and remembered 40+ years later – simply describe what these Christians are experiencing, under the assault of the Empire and in the context of the separation of the Christian and Jewish communities. When Jesus says *“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...”* Luke’s hearers could nod in sad recognition and say, *“Yes, that is exactly what is happening to us.”* Just like what happened in many families in the border states during the American Civil War, Luke’s hearers were experiencing the ruptures of divided loyalties, the consuming consequences of contradictory choices. And so, can you see how it might indeed come as **a kind of comfort** to Luke’s flock that Jesus had seemed to anticipate what would happen when they gave their lives to him, and that He would nonetheless be with them come what may, no matter what.

But there is more to be said, and there is more that we must say. Because that opening verse of today’s scripture – *“[Jesus said:] ‘I came to bring fire to the earth’* – is at least as disturbing as the rest of the scripture. What do we do with that? Well, I know what we don’t do: we don’t use it to license, as some have done and continue to do, an attitude of seeing Jesus as the one who will come and hurt all those people we don’t like. I have seen this scripture used to license all sorts of terrible behavior, all sorts of persecutions against races and nationalities and ethnicities and sexual orientations, all sorts of attitudes utterly at odds with a gospel of God’s unconditional love for each and all.

But still, there it is: *“[Jesus said:] ‘I came to bring fire to the earth.’*” Here is how I think that this can be best interpreted, here’s what I think this verse can teach us about our own faith today, and that is this: **sometimes God is a God who brings chaos out**

of order. Chaos out of order. Now that's NOT what we usually think. And we must never think that that means anything blasphemous such as that God decides to randomly hurt people or cause them pain or evil. But, nonetheless, we are indeed more used to thinking about God in the way that God is painted in the creation story in Genesis, for as one translation of the Bible's opening verses goes: "*In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless **chaos**... and God said, 'Let there be light,'*" let there be form, let there be **order**. God indeed is the one who from the beginning, both cosmically and in each and every life, yours and mine and all the lives that He has made, seeks to bring form and order and light and life. For no one can live in pure chaos, no one can live.

But sometimes, sometimes, God also wants to bring **chaos out of order!** What do I mean? Well, consider some examples. There was no more **orderly** regime than Nazi Germany, and God moved mightily with martyrs like Dietrich Bonhoeffer and so many others to break up and destroy such an evil and damnable *orderliness*. The American institution of slavery was in fact oh-so-**very-orderly**, but the Spirit of God worked through men and women of all faiths and no faiths to bring *chaos* to *that* odious, awful *order*. There is an obscenely profitable **orderliness** today to the sex worker industry in Thailand and other parts of Asia, an orderliness that includes the sale of eight-year-old girls into prostitution – and Disciples missionaries and their colleagues are working very hard to bring some *chaos* to that terrible *order* in the name of God. For you see, the truth is that God is a God of justice and we must never, ever let the idea of justice get captured by either the political left or right, by either Republicans or Democrats, because **God's** justice is a very different thing. For **God's** justice invites us first of all to confession, not to finger-pointing. Richard Donovan writes words that I know have sometimes applied to me sometimes in my own complacency and self-satisfaction with hurtful orderliness; maybe his words also convict you: "*We see an*

entertainment industry promoting sex and violence, but protest efforts to curb its freedom even as it corrupts our children. We see on television the poor of the world dying of starvation, but go to our dinner tables without considering how we might help. We see the people of Africa dying of AIDS, and change the channel. We hear stories of Christians being persecuted around the world, and fail to remember that these are our brothers and sisters."² There are all kinds of orders and "orderlinesses" that need a touch of chaos, aren't there? And this morning, these words of Jesus would challenge you: Is there one of those particular "orders," one of those societal patterns of injustice and hurt, that particularly calls to you, calls to your wallet, calls to your time? Then God may well be asking you to help bring some chaos to these particular unjust "orders."

Bringing "chaos out of order." But you know what? This not only applies to where God is calling us in ways large or small to confront unjust and hurtful things in *society*, it also applies to your life and mine in a much more personal way. Ask yourself this morning: is there something about your own life that is in fact **too** ordered? Something whose very form and stability and is sucking something out of you? Do you worry that you are too complacent? Do you worry that you shy from new possibilities? One of Paul McCartney's most haunting songs³ is about a woman trapped in the over-orderliness, shall we say, of her life; as it describes the woman it uses this phrase about her over and over again: *"It's just another day, It's just another day"* – another day of routine, another day of possibilities perished, another day of boring and banal and life-draining orderliness. In a similar way, former Methodist Bishop Woody White wrote these thoughtful words a few years ago:

A recent book caught my attention. The title is If It Ain't Broken, Break It... [What

²<http://www.lectionary.org/EXEG-English/NT/ENT03-Luke/Luke%2012.49-56.htm>

³"Another Day," www.uppercutmusic.com/artist_w/wings_lyrics/another_day_lyrics.html

the book does] is to try to challenge the corporate leaders of our nation to think beyond the typical traditional modes and attitudes to look at that which probably should be broken and not remain. [But] It is [also] a challenge to us. What [in us] needs to be broken? What needs to be changed? What needs to have a new perspective?....

And then Bishop Whjite continues in a more personal vein: Again, listen to his wise words: What

...may I ask you... in your life might need to be broken? Is there some attitude, some behavior, some mode of thinking, some pattern of being that needs to be broken or changed? I dare you to reexamine [your] life and determine what it is that needs to be broken.... You know what it is: some animosity, some sense of hatred, some sense of envy or ill will. [Or] Perhaps you have set your sights too low, and all of this has shaped your life.⁴

Wise words. For in your life and mine, there are indeed corners of orderliness that indeed need a little chaos, a little breaking. Maybe there is something that looks so orderly on the outside, but is killing you on the inside. Maybe it's a relationship whose patterns are dispiriting you; maybe it's something in your own behavior that is oh-so-orderly but which no longer works and which you would love to give up. It may just be that God is indeed calling you to a little chaos, wanting to lead you there – but with the assurance that He won't ever abandon you in the hard work of change.

[Jesus said:] "I came to bring fire to the earth." There are lots of meanings of "fire" in the scriptures. But one of them is "passion." And our own language reflects this; we talk about someone's having a "fiery passion," or a "red-hot passion." That's what Jesus is offering you today: a passion, a fiery passion, for finding those places in your life or the world's life where order is no longer good but evil, where orderliness is

⁴Bishop Woodie White, "Break It," http://www.csec.org/csec/sermon/white_3911.htm

choking out possibility, where form and structure and “the way I’ve always done it” keep needed transformation from happening. In those cases, my friends, break it. In those cases, a little chaos is indeed called for. I don’t often go to country and western songs for theological insights, but in this case singer Garth Brooks got it just right in his song “*Standing Outside the Fire*”:

*We call them cool
Those hearts that have no scars to show
The ones that never do let go
And risk the tables being turned*

*Standing outside the fire
Life is not tried it is merely survived
If you're standing outside the fire⁵*

I know where Jesus wants us to stand. Shall we join him there?

⁵“*Standing Outside the Fire*, by Jenny Yates & Garth Brooks. Copyright 1993 by Criterion Music Corp./Escudilla Music/Major bob Music Co., Inc./No Fences Music.
<http://www.crossmarks.com/brian/luke12x49.htm>