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St. Anne's Episcopal Church, Warsaw  
Tenth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 15)  
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Lectionary Year C: Luke 12:49-56

If you grew up in a mainline Protestant denomination like I did, you might recall an implicit judgment placed upon your church by people from Evangelical and Pentecostal traditions. Maybe they thought our grace came a little too cheaply and the fire was no longer blazing in our furnaces. Our sole redeeming virtue? In my case, as a Lutheran, it would've been that we weren't Catholic...but we were dangerously close!

In my experience, I didn't encounter many Evangelical or Pentecostal Christians until I went to, of all places, a Lutheran high school. They seemed to be preoccupied with a lot of things that had never been on my radar screen, like the occult and demons and ecstatic utterances. And then there was one big thing that I never heard about as a teenaged Lutheran -- the end of time. Tribulation, judgment, and rapture were all things that we didn't think or talk about much. After I had a bit of theological education under my belt, I discovered that this just wasn't a big part of our tradition. What happens in the end is, as it turns out, in God's hands, and so it doesn't make much sense to waste our time thinking about the day or the hour.

Legend has it that, when someone asked Martin Luther what he'd do if someone told him that the world would end tomorrow, he replied, "I'd plant a tree!"

Thus, given my background, I wouldn't name today's Gospel text as one of my favorites to preach on. It's a very fiery, end-times kind of text. Jesus names a lot of things that will foreshadow the end of the world, if you inter-

pret them in a particular way. There's fire. There's division. There are fathers against sons, sons against fathers, mothers against daughters, daughters against mothers, mothers-in-law against daughters-in-law, and daughters-in-law against mothers-in-law. This is the Hatfields and the McCoys magnified exponentially!

And here, Jesus is not the healer or reconciler; rather, he is the radical prophet who will test the faithfulness of his believers by giving them an ultimatum -- who will it be, family or me? He will set members of families against each other in order to determine who's really a disciple. (One might notice here that families divided over matters of religion isn't exactly a new thing!)

I get the impression, therefore, that the last thing Jesus wants is casual, arrogant disciples. There's a song by U2 that came out when I was in high school; it's called "Until the End of the World," and it imagines a conversation between Jesus and Judas. Judas' refrain is sung by Bono in a cool, detached style -- "You, you were acting like it was the end of the world."

Very fitting for Jesus as he calls his disciples to be anything but casual and arrogant. Jesus would remind us, "Of course I was acting like it was the end of the world!"

For as much as we might not want to grapple with end-of-the-world things like fire and division, we still need to acknowledge the urgency with which Jesus calls his disciples. If Jesus was "acting like it was the end of the world," we take him seriously even if it wasn't or isn't.

And lest today's text be seen as teeming with judgment and lacking in grace,

look again at Jesus' own words: "I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what stress I am under until it is completed" (Luke 12:50). Here, he wants everyone to be baptized and be a part of his fold. But to this day, he needs faithful and committed people to accomplish this. The good news doesn't get us anywhere without disciples; thus, Jesus awakens us from complacency with end-of-the-world urgency.

But ultimately, it is a life-giving, grace-filled message that we take into the world. Our vocation may not set us against our own family members, but it may cause stress and occasional discomfort. I can't help but think that someone might find it a bit awkward to invite another person to the waters of Baptism in our reserved, Episcopalian culture. But be reminded that there is an urgency to this call, particularly as our churches experience declines in membership.

Now, let's think about some aspects of the average church's "culture" that might be counterproductive. There's an old joke among the clergy and those who've served on search committees that puts forth the request for a new rector something like this: "We're looking for an experienced, visionary, forward-thinking rector who will keep things in our church exactly as they are."

I think we all know what this means...

But allow me to explain, anyway. In a typical congregation, there's often a great deal of excitement and hope when calling a new rector. People start feeling the buzz and are thinking about all that new energy and all those new ideas that will be the long-awaited reinvigorating that the congregation desperately needs. But what happens after the rector arrives and the honeymoon

comes to an end after a few months? All sorts of things start bubbling up that no one -- including the rector -- was prepared to deal with, and the time that would've been better spent growing the church is spent putting out fires of one kind or another. Unless the rector is a master mission-redeveloper and can charm the bad habits out of a place, he or she won't get very far.

I believe that Jesus would call us to be better than that. And that's where the hard work is. But without that, the church becomes both the setup and the punchline for the aforementioned joke: "We're looking for an experienced, visionary, forward-thinking rector who will keep things in our church exactly as they are."

And sometimes we've even seen fathers set against sons, sons set against fathers, mothers set against daughters, and daughters set against mothers, especially when a congregation (or an entire church body like The Episcopal Church) says it's going to change and then really does! Certainly, this can be very painful, and, while I believe it is very important for people to have convictions, we cannot turn our convictions into barriers to dialogue and compromise. Here, I might have to part ways with the uncompromising Jesus of this morning's Gospel text, because I don't think the twenty-first-century church will survive much more division.

But none of us knows God's plan for the Church. Yes, Jesus prayed "that [we] may be one" (John 17:11) in direct contradiction to what he's telling us today, so I can only conclude that God's plan is vastly more difficult to comprehend than the mysteries of the universe. In the meantime, where reconciliation is not possible, we will simply have to live with the imperfection of division...and trust that God will one day heal it.

Lastly, if we don't talk about the end times very much, let us at least consider the end-of-the-world urgency with which our Lord calls us to discipleship. It is the precious gift of Baptism -- and indeed, the very gift of salvation itself -- that our Lord wants us to share...regardless of the costs. And if that causes discomfort, division, or a change in the way we do things around here, it shouldn't be the end of dialogue or compromise, either, because the God in whom we trust helps, protects, and guides us amid all the fires that burn. No division will be permanent as long as we listen to him. And even when he himself sets those fires, it may be just to wake us up...

Amen.