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Trinity Church, New Orleans
Luke 12: 49-56
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I remember a picture that hung on the wall of one of the Sunday School classrooms in the church where I grew up. It was a pastoral scene. Jesus was seated on a large stone beneath a tree, a tree unlike any I was familiar with in West Virginia. Gathered around him were boys and girls and some sleepy looking sheep. You could see that he was telling a story and all eyes, except the sheep's, were on him. It was a very sentimental picture in a 1950's sort of way, and it conveyed a sense of security and warmth. Being in Jesus's presence, the children were safe. Being in Jesus's presence, the children knew comfort and love. And looking at that picture, I knew all of that security and warmth and comfort and love for myself.

That picture came to mind this week as I sat with this morning's gospel reading, which comes at the end of chapter 12 of Luke's gospel. The children are all grown up now and Jesus has been telling these grownups some hard truths. He's giving them a reality check on what is in store for them if they want to continue being his followers. They are disciples, which is a churchy word that means students, and if they want to be students, they have to learn to be like their teacher. And that will be hard. In fact, the words we hear Jesus speaking to his students this morning are among what scholars call the "hard sayings" of Jesus. We sometimes, maybe oftentimes, have a picture of Jesus like the one hanging on my old Sunday School wall. The warm and winsome Jesus, the one who is safe and comfortable, the one who, let's be honest, doesn't ask too much of us. Well, that's not who we and his students meet this morning, is it? This morning, we hear that true

discipleship may bring the disciple into conflict and controversy. True discipleship may bring discomfort instead of comfort. True discipleship will bring fire. “Hard sayings” indeed.

Now that leads us to ask, “Who is this Jesus?” The answer, I submit to you, is that Jesus is both prophet and pattern. Let’s see what I mean by that. Luke tells us earlier that Jesus’s first act in his public ministry is to stand up in the synagogue in Nazareth, unroll the scroll of the Prophet Isaiah, and read to the crowd:

*“The Spirit of the Lord is on me,
because he has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners
and recovery of sight for the blind,
to set the oppressed free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”*^[1]

Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him. He began by saying to them, “Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.” Luke 4: 18-21.

Jesus not only makes this prophetic proclamation, he embodies the prophetic proclamation. He himself is the good news to the poor. He himself brings freedom to the prisoners and the oppressed and sight to the blind. He himself embodies the year of the Lord’s favor. Indeed, in many respects, that is what the entire gospel of Luke is all about. And he invites his disciples, his students, to follow his pattern.

So, let’s talk about what it means to be a disciple, a follower of Jesus’s pattern, a student of Jesus right here at Trinity Church in August 2025. Now let me

assure you that I'll never say a word to you that I don't first need to hear myself. One of my great mentors in seminary said to me on more than one occasion, "Watch your pronouns, Breckinridge," meaning that whenever I had the pull to say "you" – like "you should or you shouldn't do this or that" – perhaps I really ought to be saying, "I". "I should or I shouldn't do this or that." You see what I mean? So, this morning, I'm going to make it explicit that I'm preaching a sermon to me.

Now, I'm going to invite you to come along, but I want to make it clear that the first person I'm talking to is me. In fact, I can't tell you how hard discipleship is going to be for you without telling you how hard it is for me. And there has never been a more urgent need for true discipleship than in this moment we're living in. It's an apocalyptic moment – remember that the term apocalypse means a revealing, a showing, an unveiling. We are seeing in real time the fragility of our economy with its huge gaps between the wealthiest and the poorest among us. The sin of racial injustice embedded in our culture that is crying out for healing and reconciliation is being revealed ever more clearly. And day by day the bitterness and rancor and division in our culture that has been with us far too long is becoming ever more destructive. Civic violence that was once upon a time unthinkable has now become commonplace. Gun violence is rampant, and no place, including churches and synagogues and schools, is safe. This moment really does meet the definition of apocalyptic. So, the question I'm putting to myself right now is "How shall I be a follower of Jesus, as hard as that will certainly be, now, today, in this apocalyptic moment?"

First, the student needs to be like the teacher, to follow the teacher's pattern. So, what does it mean for me to be like Jesus? Well, Jesus lets it be known right quick that he's not here to be a warm and fuzzy do-gooder. "Do not think I've come to bring peace, but a sword," he says. The cost of real peace, true peace, might feel

like a sword cutting through some of my conventional wisdom, cutting through some of my assumptions about how to comfortably get along in the world. I mean, if Jesus was just a sweet guy with a sweet message, shouldn't he have been able to stay out of trouble? Why did people call him such nasty names? Why would being his follower wreck families like we hear this morning? And if he was so well thought of, how did he end up on a cross? The answer isn't that Jesus's opponents had a lot of strange, unpopular ideas. No, he did. It turns out that the Kingdom of God that Jesus was teaching and living out was subversive. It was controversial. It was countercultural. The Kingdom of God was going to bring conflict and not phony peace. So being a follower means seeking the Kingdom of God in a single-minded way and letting go of worrying about the consequences. Remember in the Beatitudes where Jesus says, "Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God?" That's what he's talking about. Being "pure in heart" means being single-focused and letting the chips fall where they may. Will I be able to seek the Kingdom in these times without worrying about who gets offended or unhappy or angry with me? We'll see, I guess. But that's the way it will have to be if I'm to be a true follower of Jesus.

The second part I need to focus on as I figure out how to be a real follower of Jesus's pattern in these days is whether to be afraid or not to be afraid. On the one hand, in so many other places in Scripture, Jesus tells his followers not to be afraid. Be brave, have courage, stand strong. You're worth more than all the sparrows. If I'm going to speak God's truth as I understand it, I'm going to be opposed. So, the strength of my convictions needs to be able to withstand intimidation and unpopularity. On the other hand, I better fear God too. If the words I speak and the actions I take – even if they are nice and kind and uncontroversial – are really words and actions that deny the Kingdom, well, that means I lose my advocate before the

Father. So, God's claim on my life is a comfort in the face of the dangers that working for the Kingdom brings. But that claim is total. I read something from a biblical scholar recently that really resonates with me. "Proper fear of God always manifests itself in the world of human affairs as fearlessness." Yes, this is a case where fear is actually healthy.

The third piece of the Gospel text that I need to hear is what seems like Jesus's strange antipathy towards families. Not just here but in other places in the Gospels, Jesus speaks as if families get in the way of being a follower. And Jesus is often seen to be in conflict with his own family. Now, we should know that the first hearers of the Gospel often faced immense family pressure to reject Jesus. He was, after all, countercultural. He seemed to be a dangerous opponent of the established order and the established religion. We can well imagine the most loving mother or father admonishing their son or daughter not to be led astray by this radical. Undoubtedly, lots of family bridges were burned by Jesus's earliest followers. I often think about the calling of James and John who were among Jesus's first disciples. Remember they were fishermen working with their father, Zebedee. One day this character Jesus shows up and says, "Come with me and I'll show you how to fish for people." And we're told they immediately—immediately—dropped their nets and followed Jesus. Now, I worked for my father in his business for about five minutes before I went to law school and I'm also a father with two sons of my own. We're not told how old Zebedee felt about his only deckhands abandoning the family business, but I'll bet he wasn't happy. I can resonate. How about you?

What other loyalties might get in the way of my being a follower? How can I make sure that the Kingdom of God is my first priority? It's a call for me to examine my attachments. Another old teacher of mine used to say "Tell me the most important thing in your life and I'll tell you who your God is." Is my family the most

important thing in my life? Yep. Sure is. Is that a barrier to me being a fully committed follower? I'm quite sure it is on many occasions. So, the work for me is to come to appreciate fully that being a truly committed follower of Jesus will actually strengthen the bonds of family and kinship. And, if I can do that, then I will no doubt make better choices when it comes to everything, including my family. The same can be said for anything else we either consciously or even sub-consciously cling to. Our work is to make sure that those attachments don't weaken our commitment to being a true follower of Jesus.

So, in the days and weeks and months to come, as I live and work in this apocalyptic time, my hope is to live and work fearlessly – fearlessly following Jesus – fearlessly following where the Holy Spirit leads me. And as we work through what has been revealed in this apocalyptic moment, the Spirit is undoubtedly going to lead me, and lead you, into places that are uncomfortable.

Which leads me to share another uncomfortable truth with you. That truth is that Trinity, this place I so dearly love, as do so many of you, is approaching a crossroads. For the last several years, Trinity's stewardship of its financial resources has not kept pace with inflation. Giving is down. You've seen the tangible fallout from this as some staff have been laid off or have not been replaced after moving on. Attendance at worship has been declining. In fact, year over year from 2017 through 2024 Sunday attendance has declined by 25%. And Trinity has a physical plant that needs attention even beyond the scope of the very successful capital campaign. None of this has been dramatic. Just a slow drip-drip. But if attention isn't paid, if action isn't taken soon, the drip will become a systemic problem that will be increasingly difficult to sustain. This interim period we are in now is exactly the right time to address these issues of evangelism and financial commitment. They really go hand in hand, you know. It's going to take dedicated staff to support

you and me in our work of evangelism as we invite others to join us here and that will take more money than is currently available to us. Now, the good news is that this community has the financial capacity, the skills, the vision, and most importantly, the faithfulness to turn this supertanker in the right direction. But having the capacity and offering it - time, talent, and financial resources- in service to Trinity's mission and ministry are not the same thing. Here's the truth. Your church needs your generous support and your heartfelt commitment now more than ever. Your church needs YOU! We simply must keep ever before us the words of the Prophet Micah, who said: "What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly before God." After all, that's Trinity's mission statement, isn't it? It's the work of the Gospel of Jesus – the work of the Kingdom of God—the work of Trinity Church. I pray that I – and you and all of us – will be wise enough and fearless enough to begin. To do the work of justice. To love mercy and kindness with all our hearts. And to always – always – walk humbly before God.

Now, let's circle back to that sweet little picture on my old Sunday School wall. That picture tells a deep truth. In the presence of Jesus, the Risen Christ, there is safety and security and comfort and love. Let's hold that picture right alongside the picture from this gospel reading of the hard truths that come with being Jesus's disciple. I am here to tell you that both of these pictures are true! But here's the thing. You have to go through the second picture, you have to really live out the hard truths of being a disciple, before you can claim the truths of the first picture. There's a story that's told about one of the 20th century's greatest Protestant theologians, a man named Karl Barth. Barth wrote a magisterial four volume work of systematic theology called The Church Dogmatics. While I read as much of it as I could in seminary, I'll tell you it was a real slog. Nevertheless, Barth's work has been

extraordinarily influential. As the story goes, however, towards the end of his life, following a university lecture during the Q & A time, a student asked Barth if he could summarize his whole life's work in theology in a sentence. Barth replied, "Yes, I can. In the words of a song I learned at my mother's knee: 'Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so.'" He paused for a moment and continued, "But I had to write The Church Dogmatics to know what that really meant." That is, he had to do the hard and difficult work of being a disciple, of being a student of Jesus, before he could sink into the deep truth, the uncomplicated simplicity, of Jesus' comfort and love. And so it is for you and me, my dear sisters and brothers. The hope and comfort and love of Jesus are here before us. That hope and comfort and love will carry us along as we do the hard but necessary work of following Jesus in these apocalyptic days and in this time of discernment. Always remember the two pictures. And remember that both of them are true.

My friends, it is so important that we do this work as one body. I have known this place for more than 40 years and I know to the depths of my soul that this community can do the work that needs to be done, because I know the strength of this community. I know the faithfulness of this community. It's going to be quite a ride, but Trinity, as it has for the last 175 years, will move from strength to strength. Trinity will continue to witness to the love of the Lord Jesus Christ to neighbors near and far. Trinity will continue to build the Kingdom of God in New Orleans. But it will take all of us. Every. Single. One of us. So get ready. Everybody join in. All hands on deck! There is not a moment to lose.