

**“Living in the Present”**  
**Second in the Series *Keeping the Faith***  
Luke 12:49-56

When Jesus says he wants us pay attention to the present like we pay attention to the weather – he’s serious...can you tell? It’s a good analogy though - the weather, because it still holds true today – our obsession with knowing what the weather *is* and *will be* in the hours and days to come. I myself have three “apps” on my i-Phone that keep track of the weather...in different cities even. But interpreting how to follow Christ in the present? There’s no “app” for that. We just have the Bible. And it’s a Bible that includes passages like this one.

The twelfth chapter of Luke is not what you want to read if you are feeling good about your life of faith or if you feel like you are living faithfully. So – if you are feeling good about your walk with God – I apologize in advance. I hope this sermon doesn’t mess that up. But it might. It did me.

My uncle’s a Texas cattle rancher – and when you sear initials into a cow to mark it as yours – it’s branded for life. The cow can’t forget who it is, or rather, *whose* it is. (This is assuming cow’s think about these sorts of things.) And while Christ’s certainly

not a cattle rancher – when his gospel message gets seared into your heart – you’re branded for life. You’ve always been a child of God – but when the gospel writes itself on your heart and recites itself in your head – you become more than just a child of God – you’re branded as a follower of Christ. You’re marked as one who no longer lives as the world lives – but as Christ lives. Today’s text is about never forgetting that. And realizing that with that *decision* (to follow Christ) – comes inevitable *division*.

We’re just reading the last part of the chapter, but in all of Luke 12, Jesus is instructing his disciples and the crowd gathered around to be ready for the coming judgment. The first few verses of this chapter read, “*Nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing is secret that will not become known. Therefore whatever you have said in the dark will be heard in the light, and what you have whispered behind closed doors will be proclaimed from the housetops,*” (Luke 12: 2-3). In other words, “you can run, but you can’t hide.” God sees you. So if you have to choose between being persecuted for what you say or do now or being judged by God later for what you’ve

done – choose the former. Live in the present as if what you believe is true – no matter what the consequences. You’ll be glad you did.

Now as Christians in America – we don’t know what it’s like to be persecuted for believing...and for showing or telling the world what we believe. People like Hanna Massad and the Palestinian people of Gaza Baptist Church in the West Bank of Israel – they know persecution. Too well. Their dear friends and family have been murdered for their faith. The stakes are high to be a believer. And that’s the kind of intensity we’re dealing with in *this* passage. Early Christians, if they stood up for Christ and publically admitted they were followers, could readily be outcast, stoned, or worse case scenario – as in the case of Christ – crucified.

It is in *this* setting with *this* kind of intensity, that a few verses after this and a few verses before our text today Jesus says, *“Do not worry about your life, what you will eat, or about your body, what you will wear. For life is more than food, and the body more than clothing,”* (Luke 12:22-23).

Easier said than done, right? Living in the present as people of faith means not worrying. Well, it might be easier not to worry if Jesus didn’t then go on to say, *“Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division. 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, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, etc..”* (Luke 12:51-53).

It’d be a lot easier not to worry if Jesus went on to quote 1 Corinthians 13 or Psalm 23 or John 3:16...but this? From lilies of the field to flaming fires and family feuds? This is one of those biblical whiplash moments.

It seems paradoxical that the Prince of Peace would say outright that he didn’t come to bring peace. Did Jesus go off the deep end here? Was he having a bad day and taking it out on folks out of frustration or fatigue? Is this another “turning over the money tables in the Temple” temper-tantrum? What is the “good news” in the gospel of Luke 12? I mean, if *Jesus* is saying this – it has to be “good,” right?

Well – yeah. But when it comes to following Christ – what is good for God’s Kingdom is, more often than not, the opposite of what we would deem good for ourselves. And that’s what’s hitting a nerve with Jesus here. In this country – we live lavishly and selfishly. That’s not a value judgment – it’s just a fact. There’s not a whole lot in Luke’s gospel, if anything, that supports the consumer culture of which we are a part. Even more –

there is a lot in Luke's gospel that challenges the way we live...and that challenge comes in and through the words and life of Jesus Christ. As Christians, we choose – *we choose* – to be followers of Christ. And our actions must reflect that choice. (It's at this point that this text really started to mess with me...so if you're feeling uncomfortable – you're in good company.)

Every decision we make reflects our commitments and values. If they don't then we're not really committed. Or at least, *each time* that happens, our values are somehow compromised. And if our values point to something or someone or someplace beyond ourselves – then we compromise that name or brand or institution, or whatever it may be.

I'm sure jetBlue wishes Steven Slater had thought twice about his actions before he made a spectacle of himself in front of a plane full of customers (and subsequently the world) while on duty – while wearing his flight attendant uniform, sporting the jetBlue logo, and supposedly espousing jetBlue values and hospitality. If you haven't heard,

Slater rose to international fame on Monday when he [after a confrontation with a passenger] flipped out aboard a jetBlue plane at Kennedy Airport, grabbed two beers and made his great escape down the emergency slide.

*An article this morning reports that:*  
Nearly a week after achieving folk hero

status, the world's most famous former flight attendant paused to catch some rays.

"I need a day at the beach," Steven Slater chirped. "I'm exhausted."

Donning a gray cutoff T-shirt, white shorts and a beige hat, Slater greeted excited fans at Rockaway Beach.

Fans cheered, "Great job, Steve!" and "We love you!" as he plopped down in a chair, took off his shirt and put on his sunglasses. "If anyone needs to relax, it's Steve. He's had a [heck] of a week," said Brian Vourakous, 62, who lives nearby. "We love Steve. He's a hero."

"Every dog deserves his day at the beach," said Vickie Lawrence, 54. "Even this one."<sup>1</sup>

I have no comment other than to say that the reason this made the news is because flight attendants are *supposed to be* cordial and compliant and put the customer's safety first and keep their temper tantrums to themselves. They are not supposed to lash out. Slater's behavior didn't reflect his company's values, to say the least. At least this *one* time.

Keleigh Nealon, 25 said she's flown with Slater several times before, and his bubbly personality always brightened her day.

"I just feel so bad for him," said Nealon. "I've been on flights with him and he's the one who is always so nice. He makes your

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<sup>1</sup> Samuel Goldsmith and Matthew Lysiak, "Steven Slater, ex jetBlue flight attendant who flipped out on passenger, relaxes at the beach," *New York Daily News* (Sunday, August 15<sup>th</sup>, 2010, 4:00 AM). Accessed at [http://www.nydailynews.com/ny\\_local/2010/08/15/2010-08-15\\_beach\\_slide\\_for\\_jet\\_guy.html](http://www.nydailynews.com/ny_local/2010/08/15/2010-08-15_beach_slide_for_jet_guy.html) on 15 August 2010.

flight enjoyable."

"It was so out of character," Nealon added. "You knew something was wrong. Something bad had happened."<sup>2</sup>

Well – okay. He’s human. We all make mistakes. Obviously this incident has struck a chord with many people. But whatever it is about this guy’s humanity that resonates with people doesn’t change the fact that the mistakes we make *in uniform* always seem to have greater consequences. I guess you could say that as Christians, our “uniform” is that we wear our heart on our sleeve – or rather God’s heart. And every time we do something out of “character” (that is something that doesn’t reflect the character of Christ) – then something must have gone wrong.

I think what “goes wrong” is that we become enamored with our own needs...dwelling on what’s happened to us in the past, worrying about what’s going to happen to us in the future – and therefore – never giving ourselves the mental or emotional or spiritual energy enough to truly live in the present. And when we’re not paying attention in the present – our decisions reflect that.

When Jesus talks to his disciples

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<sup>2</sup> Barry Paddock, Alison, Gendar, Matthew Lysiak and Rich Schapiro, “Some passengers dispute jetBlue flight attendant Steven Slater’s claim that he was provoked,” *New York Daily News* (Friday, August 13<sup>th</sup>, 2010, 4:00AM). Accessed at [http://www.nydailynews.com/ny\\_local/2010/08/13/2010-08-13\\_out\\_to\\_launch.html?obref=obinsite](http://www.nydailynews.com/ny_local/2010/08/13/2010-08-13_out_to_launch.html?obref=obinsite) on 15 August 2010.

about the judgment – he’s not talking about hellfire and damnation. He’s talking about *living in the present*. He’s trying to get their attention. And probably some real commitment from them. And us. He’s (perhaps like a parent does to a child) grabbing our chins, turning our heads to look us in the eye and saying, “*Listen. Listen to me. I am the way. The way I live is what leads to Truth and to Life. The way you are living is not working. Perhaps he repeats that part: **The way you are living is not working.** Because the way you live prohibits you from loving as you should...it distracts you from peace...it attaches you to this world...and it distances you from me.*”

Jesus is trying to get through to us that he has indeed come to bring peace, but the work of redemption inevitably brings division also. And we can’t avoid that – in fact we should expect it and prepare for it. Although the Kingdom of God is characterized by reconciliation and peace, the announcement of that kingdom is always divisive because it requires decision and commitment.<sup>3</sup>

We are still praying “thy kingdom come” because “thy kingdom” has yet to come. What will it take? It might be good here to say a brief

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<sup>3</sup> R. Alan Culpepper, “The Gospel of Luke: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections” *The New Interpreter’s Bible Commentary* Vol. IX (Abingdon Press: Nashville, 1995), pg 266.

word about the fire in this passage. Jesus claims first that he came to “cast fire upon the earth” (v49). The announcement refers back to Luke 3:16, when John claims that Jesus will baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire. Interestingly, when the fire does come – it comes upon the disciples in Acts – at Pentecost. And it’s not the consuming fire of judgment but *the purifying fire of the Holy Spirit*. The Gospel of Thomas, a text not in our Bible but of that same time, invokes this image as well: “*Whoever is near me is near fire; whoever is distant from me is distant from the kingdom.*”<sup>4</sup>

If we’re avoiding fire, that is, if we’re avoiding conflict to be comfortable in our faith, then we’re living distantly. Not distantly from the things *we love*, but distantly from *the God who loves us*. But Jesus is saying in Luke 12 that those who commit themselves to Jesus must prepare for the opposition they will face, sometimes even from their own families. Wherever and whenever the Word of God has been heard throughout history, division has occurred among the people who heard it.

Jesus himself is the first casualty of the division that necessarily comes with the proclamation of God’s Kingdom.<sup>5</sup> He is crucified – and his mother is separated from her son,

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 266. (*Gospel of Thomas*, 82).

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 266-267.

even as the Son is brought back to His Father. Other families would later be divided by faith and unbelief (v 52-53) as we read in our text today, but Jesus would suffer the brunt of the opposition and his own family would be divided by its effects.

Living in the present, as a follower of Christ, affects the way we relate to friends, to family, to our neighbors, to the world. Because our commitment to Christ shapes our values, priorities, goals, and behavior, it also forces us to change old patterns of life, and these changes may precipitate crises in significant relationships or even more, in the way we are living our lives. (I’m feeling uncomfortable again, are you?)

In the movie I referred to last week and of which this series is named, *Keeping the Faith*, both the priest and the rabbi choose to follow God in their calling and therefore choose to have limitations on who they can love and marry, or in the priest’s case, not marry. Keeping their friendship intact depends first and foremost on them keeping their faith intact.

There’s a funny line in the movie when Ed Norton, the priest, is at a bar rambling drunk about hurt relationships, and the bartender says: “*May those who love us, love us. And those who don’t love us - may God turn their hearts. And if He cannot turn their hearts, may he turn their*

*ankles, so that we may know them by their limping.*”<sup>6</sup> There is truth in this humor. Jacob didn’t walk away from wrestling the Lord without a limp. And remember who he was limping off to meet? His brother – Esau. Talk about division. But also – remember that beautiful reconciliation.

Jesus words in this text arrest us because they wrestle with our hearts and our priorities and the way we live. I live very attached to this world. To many things, but in particular – books, clothes, and shoes. And I live attached to people – and easily become more attached to them than I am to God. I am fortunate in that my family and friends support me in my decision to be a Christian – because they are people of faith too. But that doesn’t mean they always understand why I’m a pastor – or why following Christ for me can’t be an afterthought – that it is my vocation to make Christ my *every* thought. But the truth is – it’s the vocation of every Christian to make Christ their every thought...and it’s not until we do this – that loving others is possible and that peace has a chance.

Jesus says he didn’t come to bring peace to the earth. And he didn’t, because he can’t. That is, he can’t bring about peace by himself. And we really want him to be able to do this

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<sup>6</sup> Found on *The Internet Movie Database* website accessed on 15 August 2010 at <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0171433/quotes>.

peace thing himself because then it doesn’t have to involve us...and if it doesn’t have to involve us then our lives don’t have to change or reflect anything other than our own needs and desires.

Jesus proclaimed peace from the rooftops but unless we hear that call and live as peacemakers in the present – we’ll continue to live the way we are now – in a broken world. The urgency in Jesus’ words today is that we have to help bring peace about...there’s that “being the hands and feet of Christ” thing again. And that’s what causes division sometimes - because when we act like Jesus - it separates us from the rest of the world...

We learned this lesson of faith from our ancestors – that they kept the faith even when it was hard and split apart their families. And next week – we’ll be reminded to trust in God when we look toward the future. These two things help us keep the faith as we live in the present.

But ultimately – it’s the choices we choose to make today that show people **who we are** and **whose we are**. Lucky for us, we’re born as children of God, but even more amazing, and *this* is the good news: **we’re branded first and foremost by God’s forgiving grace**. This grace is what Jesus brought to us, continues to bring to us, and will forever bring

to us, and it's what keeps us going.  
We couldn't keep the faith without it,  
yesterday, today, or tomorrow!  
Thanks be to God for that.

Amen.