

Sermon – Luke 12:49-56
David R. Lyle
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“Long Division”

Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace be unto you and peace in the name God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. I would like to begin this sermon by simply pointing out my extreme kindness, generosity, and magnanimity. I mean, really, who’s got two thumbs and is super nice? This guy! After all, I could have taken either the first or second reading for my sermon text today, and asked either of our associate pastor candidates to preach on the Gospel reading appointed for this weekend during our vespers service last night. Sure, they didn’t exactly have softballs for texts but still, I hope they’ve taken note of what an exceptional colleague in ministry I will be! After all, who wants to preach on today’s Gospel text from Luke? Not me. Where did “Have no fear, little flock” Jesus go? It’s one of those texts where, when you finish reading it, you want to say, “The Gospel of the Lord?” with a decided question mark at the end of it. How is today’s gospel gospel? Jesus says, “I will bring fire to the earth! Do you think I’ve come to bring peace? No, I tell you, but rather division! You hypocrites!” He talks about how, because of him, families will be set against one another, to which we might well be thinking, we’ve already got that covered, Jesus!
2. Division, after all, seems to be the one thing of which we need no more. We’ve got division covered. No doubt you’ve had any number of family gatherings that were going along swimmingly until your pious uncle brought up religion or your strident second cousin decided that now was the perfect time to talk politics. Our current season of political elections, a feeding frenzy if ever

there was one, has reminded us of just how divided we are – or at least how divided they want us to believe we are; our world news dishes up nightly reminders of the violent divisions that shake our world to its foundations through war, terrorism, and oppression. We are taught to fear one another, huddling together into ever-shrinking enclaves of like-mindedness, clinging to whatever veneer of unity we can find in an “us” that is set over against some “them.” And our personal lives have all the division we can handle, detritus of relationships gone bad. More division? Thank you, Jesus, but no. We’ve got quite enough of that, already.

3. So where, we might ask, is the good news in all of this? Jesus connects that fire that he will bring, a fire that burns with division, to baptism, beginning with the baptism that he himself must undergo upon the cross. For Jesus came into a world that knew no shortage of division: Jew and Gentile, Jew and Samaritan, slave and free, male and female. And he knew that he must undergo a baptism of death to bring about God’s new Kingdom, for nothing short of his death – and nothing short of our deaths – will do the trick. And this itself is divisive, for it forces us to acknowledge that the very real division we create and endure, the sin and separation that rend us from God and neighbor, is not division that we can heal on our own. And so the first division we must undergo is division from our own life.
4. Thinking about division, I am reminded of the less-than-joyful process of learning how to do long division, that beloved process by which you break down multi-digit numbers until you can reach the quotient, the answer that you’re looking for. And soon I’ll get to try to teach it to my kids! The equation may look difficult, say, 490 divided by fourteen. Sure, you bright people can do this in your head, but it was tough for little third-grade Pastor Lyle. But with long division, the answer quickly becomes apparent – in this case, 35. Division, in math, is how we break down complex equations until the answer becomes clear. And this is true for baptism as well, for we are curious

numbers, deadly equations in which sin and fear and hatred and suffering and death itself have multiplied until they are beyond our control. So Jesus breaks us down, allowing himself to be broken in death and then calling us to die. It's the only answer to a problem as difficult as sin and death. The only way to find clarity is to be born anew and receive a new life from God.

5. It is here that good news begins to emerge, for the division Jesus brings is not, ultimately, a further destructive force in our lives. It is, in fact, the only hope for wholeness and unity that we have. Left to our own devices we'll end up, well, pretty much where we are. We don't need our more of our own devices; we need Jesus. We need to die: to ourselves and our certainties, and rise in the likeness of Jesus Christ. Like all division, it can be a painful process. Death most often is. But unlike the division we have created, Jesus divides us to unite us, kills us to make us alive. And it is here, in a unity that is not of our own creation, that we begin to see what it means to live as God's people in this world, in this lifetime. It is here, together in Christ, that we can find the grace to have conversations that might otherwise divide us but that through the Spirit lead to a greater fullness of life. It is here, together in Christ, that we can talk about sexual orientation and gender identity, or race relations and privilege, or the causes of terror, or gun violence, or even, heaven help us, presidential politics. Why? Because we have been divided from our need to be right and to have others be wrong, and have instead received the gift of unity that comes from Jesus Christ, that supports and sustains us, together, as one Body of Christ, living out God's life for the sake of the world.
6. We have been, in baptism, divided from divisiveness and gifted with unity. We have been killed and made alive. And yes, as we live out our discipleship as followers of Jesus, this may lead to further division in this world as we abandon the ways of hate and fear for a new way of life and peace. The world, in its division, might rally against us. After all, as Robert Farrar Capon writes,

“People will fight rather than switch from the prudent wisdom of ordinary living to the scandal and the foolishness of a crucified Messiah.” It is to this that we are called, to witness of the crucified and risen Lord in any way we can, even if it earns us scorn and derision. So be it, for our lives are secure in God’s hands.

7. Lynn Japinga tells of conscientious objectors in Britain during the First World War. These individuals did not feel that war was the way to resolve conflict, or at least that particular conflict, so they refused to fight. Many, out of their Christian convictions, would not use a weapon to kill another human being, and so many were sent to war and given the job of stretcher bearer. They would go and gather the bodies of the dead and wounded, often harassed and despised by soldiers and citizens alike and, being that they were on the battlefield, were often killed as they sought to bring hope and comfort through works of mercy. These individuals stood against the divisiveness of warfare, witnessing to a better way, and they paid for it, sometimes with their very lives. And yet, safe in Christ, they were able to live faithfully and fearlessly. We, too, have been called to die for this world’s brokenness will not be solved by more brokenness; this world’s divisions will not be healed through more division. But the mercy, love, and unity that come in and through Jesus Christ, lived out in our baptismal vocation, are more than enough to bring healing and hope.

8. We don’t want more division. But it’s what Jesus gives us, breaking us down to build us up, killing us to make us alive, baptizing us to set us free. Together, in Christ, we find the unity that otherwise eludes us. It’s present for us as a gift even now, even when it’s not always apparent. You, my friends, are called and united for faithful, fearless living. You who once were dead are now alive, called to bring healing and wholeness to the world from the only place it can possibly come: our crucified and risen Savior.

And now may that peace that passes all understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, this day and forever. Amen.