

The Hard Way Out

I don't know who coined the phrase, "the easy way out." I even spent a little time looking this week. I consulted the internet and my old faithful copy of Bartlett's Familiar Quotations but to no avail. Perhaps the phrase can't be traced because it is so ubiquitous. Taking the easy way out of problems or difficulties would seem to be a very understandable, very universal impetus. Offering easy solutions is big business. That's why books in the "...For Dummies" line sell like hot cakes, why a best-selling kitchen cleaning product is called "Easy-Off," why little girls still beg for the "Easy-Bake Oven," and why the letters E & Z are so often seen together in ads, product names and company names. There's an often funny series of commercials that have been around for the last couple of years promoting a certain office supplies company with the icon of an "Easy Button." I'm guessing that if we were to sit together and see which sayings of Jesus we remember, it wouldn't be too long before someone would cite, "my yoke is easy and my burden is light." But in one of those paradoxes of the faith that I mentioned last week, our Gospel passage for this morning finds Jesus suggesting that his way is anything but easy. In fact, it sounds very much like following Jesus is taking the hard way out.

These sayings of Jesus that we read from Luke this morning can sound harsh. They have been used to justify all sorts of violence by Christians, from the Crusades to the intradenominational nastiness that continues to plague us. But I would posit that when we look at what Jesus has to say in the context of Luke's Gospel and in conjunction with other readings in this morning's lectionary, we will find not a license for the destruction of infidels but rather a call to invest our own lives in a journey through this life traveled with love, self-sacrifice and fidelity. I also believe that when walked in the company of Our Lord, this seemingly rough and stony path will prove to be easier on our souls than any easy way out offered by our broken and self-centered culture.

The first words of Jesus in this passage can certainly bring to mind images of vengeful armies of saints or angels sweeping down upon a world of miserable sinners. "I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled!" It hearkens back to the words of John the Baptist early in Luke's Gospel: "John answered all of them by saying, "I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire." As I mentioned when we looked at these verses some months ago, I think the key to understanding this fire is not seeing it as a destructive fire but rather, as in the words of the prophet Malachi, as a refiner's fire – not punishing or destroying but purifying. All of us have things in our lives that we would best be purged of, whether they are destructive habits or destructive memories. The work of convicting us of the need to purify our lives in this manner and of burning away our personal chaff belongs to the Holy Spirit, who is of course famously depicted by Luke in Acts as tongues of fire.

If we begin to think of the fire that Jesus says he has come to bring as the fire of the Holy Spirit, then Jesus' desire for that fire to be kindled makes far more sense than some sort of thirst for vengeance. As we consider the work of the Holy Spirit as the one who convicts us of our need to be refined in the fire, then we may also consider the role of fire as light to illuminate us. We say that Jesus is the true light of the world – can this be the kind of fire he means? The fire of Jesus and the Holy Spirit does not burn to destroy, it burns to reveal. It reveals to us our flaws and it reveals to us our path towards God, just as the pillar of fire did for the Hebrew children on their road from Egypt. The fire

of the Holy Spirit also reveals to us the nature of God as love. One theologian whom I've quoted here before is Paul Nuechterlein. Nuechterlein consistently calls on his readers to move away from images of divine violence and the lust for sacrifice in order to focus on God's love. "I would maintain," he writes, "that the fire which should most closely be connected with the Holy Spirit is a Fire of Love. Jesus came to baptize with that Spirit and that Fire. If it burns away the chaff, it is a Fire of Love that burns away the chaff of our hardness of heart that keeps us enslaved to the sacrificial fires we continue to project onto God... the hope of the Christian faith is that it is Christ's Fire of Love that will ultimately prove to be the unquenchable fire." We have sound Biblical precedent for understanding love as a fire. The Song of Solomon 8:6 says, "Love is strong as death, passion fierce as the grave. Its flashes are flashes of fire, a raging flame." In my University days, I was introduced to the work of the Jesuit philosopher and paleontologist Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, who wrote, "The day will come when, after harnessing space, the winds, the tides and gravitation, we shall harness for God the energies of love. And on that day, for the second time in the history of the world, we shall have discovered fire."

I made the connection a moment ago between this passage and Luke's telling of Jesus' baptism. Jesus also refers to his baptism, but to one that is still in the future rather than the one he received from John. We Baptists often compare the baptism by immersion that we give to believers with the experience of our old selves dying in Christ and our bodies being raised again to walk in newness of life. Here, Jesus uses baptism as a metaphor for his own death, burial and resurrection. Matthew and Mark both record that he has done this before, in challenging John and James as to whether they are truly ready to follow him in all things. When they ask to sit at his right and left hand when he comes to glory, he says, "You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?" It is another reason that I think Jesus' mind is on God's love rather than on vengeance, for Jesus is going to the cross not out of anger but out of love. To move again to John's Gospel, Jesus said, "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him." Jesus is prepared to suffer in Jerusalem out of his love for all humankind.

Jesus' thoughts of suffering seem to lead naturally to his thoughts of the division that arises in the world as a result of his mission. Remember that in the Gospel according to Luke, Luke 4:18-19 serve as Jesus' mission statement. We are studying this now in "Soup, Salad and Soul." These are the key verses from the story about his visit to the synagogue in Nazareth at the beginning of his ministry. "When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.'" This is not a statement that did, does or will cause universal rejoicing. There are many people who have a lot to lose when Jubilee is proclaimed. There are those in places of power and privilege who don't want to have to share their room at the top with the general riff-raff. As yet another Jesuit scholar, John J. Kavanaugh of St. Louis University, writes, "(Jesus') peace does not come cheap... The command of love stokes the fire of conflict—both with others and within our hearts—over money, territory, family, and tribe." I do appreciate the Jesuits. If only we could make Baptists

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of them... but I digress. The division that Jesus brings is as a result of his coming but it is also a result of our own brokenness. It is out of our selfishness and sinfulness that some of us choose not to follow. Jesus, of course, knew the pain of family division over his message first-hand.

Jesus suffers at the sight of the division in the world and surely, so does Our Father. One of the lectionary choices in the Old Testament this week is Isaiah 5:1-7. It is a story of love betrayed: “Let me sing for my beloved my love-song concerning his vineyard: My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill. He dug it and cleared it of stones, and planted it with choice vines; he built a watchtower in the midst of it, and hewed out a wine vat in it; he expected it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes. And now, inhabitants of Jerusalem and people of Judah, judge between me and my vineyard. What more was there to do for my vineyard that I have not done in it? When I expected it to yield grapes, why did it yield wild grapes? And now I will tell you what I will do to my vineyard. I will remove its hedge, and it shall be devoured; I will break down its wall, and it shall be trampled down. I will make it a waste; it shall not be pruned or hoed, and it shall be overgrown with briars and thorns; I will also command the clouds that they rain no rain upon it. For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel, and the people of Judah are his pleasant planting; he expected justice, but saw bloodshed; righteousness, but heard a cry!” God’s expectation of us, his beloved people, is that we will be fruitful with justice and righteousness. But instead, the history of humankind is full of bloodshed and the cries of the oppressed. We divide the children of God into rich and poor, haves and have-nots, those who are in and those who are out. Instead, all of us should be embracing all of humankind, loving them as we love ourselves. Until the mission of Jesus is fulfilled, until the Good News is embraced by all for the sake of the poor and the captive, our loving God grieves. It is the grief of the betrayed lover, for truly God is the lover of our souls.

The division between those who accepted Jesus’ call and those who did not brought about his suffering. The continuing division of humankind causes God to suffer. And what about us? The other passages in today’s lectionary tell stories of the suffering of God’s people. The alternate Old Testament reading is from Jeremiah and it tells of how the prophet was dumped into a partially dried up well for daring to speak the truth of God’s word during wartime. Just as in the Psalmist’s imagery from our Call to Worship, he was truly in the pit and in the mire, thanks to those who could not bear to hear the call of God to righteousness and justice. The Epistle reading for the morning comes from Hebrews 11 & 12 – part of that long list of heroes and heroines of the faith, who suffered all manner of evils in order to stay faithful to God. According to the anonymous author, “Others were tortured, refusing to accept release, in order to obtain a better resurrection. Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned to death, they were sawn in two, they were killed by the sword; they went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, persecuted, tormented— of whom the world was not worthy. They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground.” For those saints, at least, there was no easy way out. It is a reminder to us that the brokenness and evil in our world continue to push against the love and grace of God. Even when we are blameless, those who pursue the agenda of the self stand in opposition as we seek to help others, sometimes to the detriment of ourselves as well as the mission given to us by Christ. Contrary to those who preach the gospel of prosperity, our Loving Father does not, cannot guarantee that we will experience what the world measures as success through following the way of Jesus. Our blessings and ultimate victory comes in a way that the world does not recognize.

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Hear me carefully, though. I'm not talking about "pie in the sky by and by when we die." Our focus is not to be on some ultimate reward in the future but on the work we can do to extend the Kingdom of God to this place at this time, here, now. Jesus gets plenty frustrated with those who are experts at predicting the future but pay no attention to what is going on around them. "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?" Jerry Goebel, a singer and teacher who works with at-risk youth in the eastern part of our state, has a biting and persuasive paraphrase of these verses: "'Analyze this present time!' heralds our Lord. "*This* present time! Who did (you) drive by *this* morning? Who (were you) too busy for *today* that needed a word of encouragement? What person cries out *right now* in a jail that is less than a few minutes from (your) house, work, or church? Forget about the '*end times*,' forget about *someday*, quit yakking about my return: Analyze *this* present time!'" The next time that mob comedy with Robert DeNiro and Billy Crystal comes on cable, think about Goebel's version of "Analyze This." Following Jesus may not be the easy way out and we may bring a world of trouble on ourselves by living our lives as we understand God's calling to justice, but the quality of our journey will be something beyond the world's expectations.

Jesus calls us to join in his mission. We are called to love God with all our hearts, minds, souls and strength and our neighbors as ourselves. When we answer that call, then we are in the company of all those saints listed in Hebrews 11, with Peter and James and John and Paul and those we sang of earlier and all the rest. "Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us." The race is not always on an easy track but it is the track that God has put under our feet. And as we follow the lead of Jesus, we will find ourselves strengthened by the Holy Spirit, lit up from the inside out by that unforgettable, unquenchable fire. We are led by that fire in a pillar by night and in a cloud by day – a cloud of witnesses, of all the committed men and women who have gone before us, and a cloud of the presence of God. And each day as we run our race, striving to bless those around us, striving to make this world come closer to the vision of God of the Beloved Community, we will feel what it means to be at the right hand of God. We do not need to wait for some far off day to hear God's whisper in our inner ear, "Well done, good and faithful servant." We will know God's pleasure as we do God's will, as we feed the hungry and give water to the thirsty, as we dress the naked and visit the prisoners and the sick. It's not an easy way out. It can be a hard life, demanding all that we have to give. But it is the way of Jesus and the way to truly abundant life. For the rough road ahead of us, thanks be to God.