

“Not Nice”

a sermon on Luke 12:49-56

by Nancy Raca, Covenant United Methodist Church, August 14, 2016

Let's talk about Jesus. How would you describe Jesus?

Nice?

It seems to me that “nice” is a good thing to be in our culture. I know I was raised to “be nice.” When I didn't treat someone the way my mother thought I should, she was always quick to tell me, “That wasn't very nice.” Now that I'm a pastor, it appears to be even more important – if I'm at all insensitive, I get, “That's not very nice – *for a minister.*”

I know I have said “That's not nice” to my kids many times. And I have even had a friend tell me that my husband, Paul, is “the nicest guy I've ever met.” (Which, actually, he is. Really nice.)

These days, when you ask some people what Christianity is about, you might even hear, “Well, basically it's about being *nice* to people.”

So, is Jesus a nice guy? Like this doll here? Does this little guy sum up the Jesus we love to like, or like to love?

There's certainly a lot of indication that Jesus is a nice guy. Beyond puppets and dolls like this one, there are those sunlit, happy pictures of Jesus. Jesus looking heavenward in prayer. Jesus surrounded by little children. Jesus carrying a cute and innocent lamb over his shoulders. All of those images are Biblically based, and

seeing these cultural representations of Jesus certainly makes it easy to imagine him as gentle, kind, patient, compassionate, and generous.

And Jesus *is* what we generally consider “nice” – he includes people who would normally be left out. He eats at the table with the nerds and the oddballs. He goes out of his way to greet people others overlook, he cries when his friend dies, he heals tons of people. Nice, loving, caring stuff. All good.

So when we read today’s Scripture, from Luke Chapter 12, we might feel a little off balance. This Jesus does not seem very nice! He says,

Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, I have come instead to bring division.

In *The Message*, which you have in your bulletin, his words are, “I’ve come to start a fire...I’ve come to disrupt and confront! When you find five in a house, it will be three against two and two against three; father against son and son against father; mother against daughter and daughter against mother.”

Division. Disruption. Confrontation.

What happened to the baby that was supposed to bring Peace on Earth?

Who the heck is this guy who’s going to cast fire and change everything and divide families against each other?

We are living in a time when we want – and need – peace and unity and love. We don’t want fire cast upon us! We don’t want conflict! In fact, many of us go to great

lengths to *avoid* conflict, to avoid upsetting others. I mean, can't we all just get along??

It's no wonder that the Jesus most people think of is the nice one, the peaceful one, the gentle one.

But we can't ignore today's Scripture. So what's going on here?

The Jesus we meet in today's verses is the Jesus on his way to Jerusalem. He is on his way to a cruel persecution and horrible death. And he knows this.

Jesus knows that he will soon be baptized not by water but by the fire of a trial and crucifixion. Can we blame him for being stressed out, angry, or harsh? Can we hold it against him if he loses patience with the disciples and the crowds who have been following him around but still not getting who he is??

I don't think we can, because Jesus wants them – and us – to know who he is, and why he is here.

Luke makes it clear that Jesus is here to announce the coming of the kingdom of God. The Kingdom of God. *This* is what he came for. The miracles, the healing, the nice meals – those are all great, but Jesus' *real* message is about the in-breaking of God's Reign.

It's about establishing justice, not maintaining the earthly status quo of injustice and violence. It's about a new order governed by forgiveness, humility, and love instead of power and fear.

Jesus says, "I've come to change everything, turn everything rightside up!" Did you hear that? Not upside down so much as *rightside up*. That's because Jesus knows that our world is upside down! Jesus is here to tell us that a "peace" that keeps things the same, that doesn't rock the boat, is no peace at all! Jesus doesn't want us to just "keep the peace" and avoid conflict. Jesus wants us to have, as the Gospel of John says, "a peace the world cannot give." A peace that comes only with the Kingdom of God. That we can get only if we change our ways and upend our society.

And this kind of peace, Jesus knows, only comes through fire: through discomfort and truth and tough love. It comes through self-sacrifice and difficult conversations and humility.

Jesus knows that not everyone is going to be able to do it. Not everyone is going to be willing to risk their own comfort, their own status quo, to realize the kind of beloved community God wants for us. And so we will be divided. Even within our own households and our own communities, conflict will arise between the ways of the world and the ways of Jesus.

But, this is what we are called to: We are called to *not* be "nice" all the time. We are not meant to keep the peace but instead to open our eyes to injustice around us and challenge the status quo. We are called to defy the assumptions and structures that exist in our society to lift some people up and hold others down.

And so what does that mean for us here today? What do we need to do to live fully into God's call? I believe that, like Jesus, we need to set the world on fire!

Be prophetic! Speak out against injustice! Push our community leaders to make changes! Stretch our budgets to do more for the poor and the marginalized! Be creative in how we address poverty and isolation and racism!

In the last verses of today's Scripture, Jesus addresses the crowds. He reminds them how good they are at predicting the weather based on the way the wind is blowing. And then he challenges them to recognize not only the change in the daily weather, but the change in the season that is upon them. This season that he is speaking of is not Summer or Winter or Spring or Fall. This season is a *God-season*. The word in Greek is *kairos*, and it means a critical time – a time that will shape and form *all future time*, a time that is guided by God's hand.

Jesus is talking about the time in which he is among us. That time then, 2000 years ago, and this time *now*. We are living in a God-season. A season in which we have to discern what it means to be a follower of Jesus Christ. A season in which we have to make tough choices – to confront and disrupt. A season for holy engagement, not pious obedience.

How can *you* be more like Jesus?

By turning the world rightside up, whatever that takes.

Not by being nice.