

SEEING AND PERCEIVING

Luke 12:49-56
Isaiah 5:1-7

New Store/Maysville Presbyterian Churches
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Think of your 12 closest friends. These are the people you vacation with, talk about your problems with, do life with in the most intimate and meaningful ways. Now imagine if six of those people suddenly took a political or public position you found utterly vile. Now imagine learning that those six people think that your position is utterly vile. You would suddenly realize that the people you thought you knew best and cared about most had actually been total strangers all along. You would feel disoriented, disturbed, unmoored. Your life would change.

Our Gospel lesson opens with some disconcerting, if not disturbing, words. Jesus has been teaching the crowds about the kin-dom of God; how we are to live as members of this kin-dom; how we are to place our trust, our treasure, our whole lives in God and in God's love. But, the people who, most logically, would embrace these teachings that usher in God's kin-dom here on earth, the priests and faith leaders, have taken an opposing position. If we could transport ourselves back in time to hear Jesus speaking these words, would we hear a tone of judgment and anger or anguish and heartache?

My wife and I will frequently talk about how modern technology is great for some things and limited in other ways. We usually comment on this when we read a text or Facebook post or an email that could be interpreted as hurtful or not. Without context or vocal tone or body

language, we wonder what the person who sent or posted the message fully meant.

I'm reminded of a scene from a Disney movie *The Mighty Ducks*. Again, context: A young successful lawyer is required to do 500 hours of community service for multiple DUIs. Having once been a junior hockey star, he is assigned to coach an inner city (read, "poor") city rec team. The kids are, at first, wary and distrustful of the hot-shot lawyer, now turned coach. But, they start to believe in him and in themselves when they begin winning games. The scene comes after they lose a game to a team they should have beaten. The coach from the top-ranked team approaches the lawyer and snarkily describes the lawyer and his players as "losers." This coach had been the coach of the lawyer back when he was playing pee-wee hockey. In the brief encounter, the lawyer sounds like he agrees with his former coach that his team of misfits are "losers." Overheard by a couple of those "loser kids", they tell the rest of the team what they thought they heard. Stung by this seeming betrayal, they then disrupt their school classroom the next week. Called in by the principal, the lawyer-coach is confronted by the team and eventually explains that his words to the other coach were said with irony and was a taunt that the District 5 team would be a winning team.

I don't think Jesus was using irony here when he calls the religious leaders and his other critics, "Hypocrites...." But, without voice tone and body language, we are a bit like those kids overhearing their coach's conversation — open to misunderstanding. I wonder if Jesus

was criticizing the times in which he was humanly present on earth — the Roman occupation, the collaborators and resisters, the crowds who yearned for a fresh word from God, but were shocked when it came because it wasn't what they expected. Also, was Jesus foreshadowing, perhaps, the continuing divisions, conflicts, and wars fought over what it means and takes to truly live in God's kin-dom?

I've said before that I think my mother, although born and raised in Illinois, would have made a good, stereotypical Missourian. For her, seeing was believing. Jesus notes that humans are pretty good at seeing natural signs of weather changes, but not so good at perceiving signs of cultural and ecclesial changes. We may see such signs, yet have a tough time seeing and reading correctly their meaning and impact for our lives. Perhaps, it's closer to the reality that we see the signs of change, but we are highly reluctant in engaging with the issues and making adjustments in our lives to conform to God's expectations of how we can live in the kin-dom here and now.

God's plan is one of love, grace, mercy, peace, and hope. Sometimes we find it hard to accept that plan. We want something more or at least different. We may not like the images of fire and division, but our tendency is to call for it, to blame or condemn others for all the trouble we see around us. We can't believe that God wants us to live differently; that such a life is straightforward. We project complexity into what we see and hear. Yes, God will determine who has lived up to God's plan, and there will be those who don't measure up or who

will resist, even reject, to the bitter end. But, that doesn't mean God loves them less, or not at all.

Chelsey Harmon, a pastor in British Columbia, puts it this way:

Christ knows the plan, the long arc of Creation-Fall-Redemption-Consummation/Renewal, and he knows the motivation behind every act of God: love. All of this is caught up in his reminder that he has been baptized, given a vocational calling of his own as the Incarnate God of love. By, in, and through him, all things were created, all of the world is reconciled, and the renewal of heaven and earth will become the only reality.

But then Jesus reveals even more about the loving heart of God. He confesses that what he sees happening in this world is a great stress to him; literally, he is distressed by these circumstances. It's like a bad fever holding on and causing stress to the whole body's system. What Christ sees in the world is of great concern to him, and therefore he will not simply wait for what is to come, he is beginning the work of purging fire already now by calling for repentance, proclaiming the kingdom of God, and yes, being the source of division even as the Prince of Peace.

This intimate picture into his psyche is both terrifying and beautiful. It causes me to awe and tremble that the Creator of the Universe can be distressed by what we have done to and in this world.

But it also gives me hope that when good faith attempts to keep the unity and peace of the church meet their ends, that maybe, just maybe, God is behind the division.¹

This strikes me of Jesus speaking like a parent to a child who is acting very vexingly and who has lost patience with the child. Jesus wants us to get it, to begin living as faithful believers in God, and to start acting like we both see and perceive how to live in God's kingdom. And, like a parent sometimes who uses words that shock, distorts, discombobulates us, maybe we'll listen and hope we'll live as Jesus taught

Let us pray: Mighty and loving God, we are hard-pressed to understand what You want when the message is about judgment, and division, and conflict. We embrace the violence to our detriment; we think that we are to spread such discord. But, we ignore, or overlook, Your purpose in describing such estrangement. You desire life and love above all else. And so, we pray that we may live in ways that see and perceive You at work in making present Your kingdom, Your community of faith that holds all people to Your expectations, and that we willingly join You and all whom You call to live out such peace, love, grace, and mercy. Amen

¹ Chelsey Harmon, Commentary on Luke 12:49-56, Center for Excellence in Preaching, www.cepreaching.org