

8-17-25 Sermon: “A Crisis” – Luke 12:49-56

This morning’s gospel lesson is *not* one of Jesus’ greatest hits! “I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division!” Yikes, Jesus! What happened to “Peace on earth, good will to all people?”

This is a difficult text, to be sure. Years ago, I used to read it and think it was offensive, scandalous, heartbreaking. These days...well, it really just sounds like Thanksgiving dinner.

It’s hard for us to hear that Jesus is willing not just to accept, but to *encourage* division within families. We prefer to picture Jesus sitting with Aunt Sally, crying into her cranberry sauce saying, “Why can’t we all just get along?” But instead, he’s over with Uncle Albert, pouring another drink and egging on the fight.

Perhaps we can find a little consolation in the fact that Jesus’ words here are *descriptive* rather than *prescriptive*. That is, Jesus is teaching us about way things are, not giving instruction for how we ought to live. Division among families is not the *goal* of Jesus’ ministry, but it does seem to be one of its consequences. Countercultural teachings like “Blessed are the poor,” “Love your enemies,” and “Turn the other cheek,” will always set some people’s teeth on edge.

The fact is that coming to trust in Jesus presents a *crisis* in the life of a believer. Not a crisis like a disaster or an emergency, but crisis in the original sense of the Greek word *krisis* that means “judgment.” A moment of decision. A turning point.

Biblical scholar Fred Craddock continues this line of thought, re-translating a passage in John’s Gospel to proclaim that “Jesus is the crisis of the world.”

“Crisis does not mean emergency,” he continues, “but that moment or occasion of truth and decision about life. An adequate image is that of the gable of the house. Two raindrops strike the gable, and that moment could conclude with their being oceans apart. To be placed in the situation of decision is critical, for to turn toward one person or goal or value means turning away from another.”¹

I’ve been thinking a lot about this idea of crisis, of decision point, this week, as I’ve been reading with my book club through David Kertzer’s book *The Pope at War*. It’s an exploration of the life and ministry of Pope Pius XII, the pope during World War II, and specifically his relationships with Mussolini and Hitler. Kertzer asks and seeks to answer a question that has been hotly debated in the years since the war: Did the Pope do everything in his power to prevent and intervene in the Holocaust?

Kertzer explores both public and private interactions between Pius XII and Hitler as the war and the genocide progressed. When did the Pope condemn Hitler’s actions, and when did he stay silent? When did he act, and when did he look the other way?

I’ve not finished the book yet, so I can’t tell you Kertzer’s final answer. But I can tell you that reading this book is forcing me to wrestle with the uncomfortable truth that sometimes we just can’t have it both ways. We cannot fraternize with Nazis on Monday and then turn and then stand up for Jews on Tuesday. There are times in life – crises – when we really do have to choose one way or the other. And sometimes, there *is* a wrong choice.

My friend Larissa recent wrote an article called “The Mirage of the Purple Church.” This phrase “purple church,” if you haven’t heard that terminology before, describes a faith community that seeks to be a home for people from both sides of the political aisle. Red + blue = purple.

And on the surface, that sounds like a really good thing, doesn't it? Churches are meant to be places where diverse people of all different background are joined together by our common faith. We seek to build and cherish community that focuses on what unites us rather than what divides us, for there are increasingly few places in our world where we can still find fellowship that reaches across the aisle.

But there's a danger in the purple church, Larissa writes, the danger of making an idol out of worshippers' comfort-levels. If we prioritize trying not to offend anyone, we may not be following the gospel anymore. For as Jesus reminds us this morning, the gospel is offensive and divisive: "I came not to bring peace, but division. I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled!"

The problem with the purple church, Larissa writes, is the same problem we have with purple as a color – it is actually an illusion!

Did you know that? I didn't! When our eyes see red and blue – colors from opposite ends of the spectrum of visible light – our brains get confused. They can't make sense of the conflicting wavelengths, so they "solve" the problem by creating a color that doesn't actually exist: purple.

There's no such thing as a purple church, and maybe that's because there's no such thing as purple people. Each of us comes to this place with our own unique identities, and deeply held convictions, and brokenness, and flaws. "The Church," Larissa writes, "is one of the last places where we are asked to bring all that we are and all that we hope to be. It is a place where we carry with us what is acceptable to the world, as well as the parts we are often pressured to hide. This is a holistic community; a space where our supposed messiness is honored as the full identity which makes us who God has created us to be."²

We could try to take off those identities when we come to worship together, leave our more nuanced selves at the door and put on...purple. But friends, I do not think that's who God calls us to be. Much harder – but perhaps much more faithful – is sitting with one another in the complexity of our individual and communal identities. Letting our whole selves rub up against one another – letting our ideas and opinions contradict each other – without falling into the melting pot of false unity.³

It's not easy. That's for sure. Following Jesus precipitates a crisis in our lives. A point where we really do have to choose.

Will we follow Christ anyway?

¹ Craddock p. 166.

² <https://nextchurch.net/2025/06/10/the-mirage-of-the-purple-church/>

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