

Pentecost 15C
Peace, Seattle
August 14, 2016
Luke 12:49-56; Hebrews 11:29-12:2

DECONSTRUCTION

We found refuge from the sun in a copse of trees as we waited our turn to enter the catacombs.¹

The ground on which we stood had once been a thickly layered plain of Volcanic ash, which, over the eons, gradually cured to become what the Romans call tuffa stone.

One of the qualities of tuffa is that it's soft enough to be excavated easily, but once exposed to air, it hardens to the point that it can carry substantial weight. This place along the Appian Way outside the ancient city of Rome, on land no one wanted, was perfectly suited for burial chambers, and so the story of the Callixtus Catacombs began.

Under the Roman Emperor Nero the fledging Christian movement was considered a “strange and illegal superstition.” Those who followed this new religion were mistrusted and kept apart. They were suspected and accused of the worst crimes. They were persecuted, imprisoned, sentenced to exile or condemned to death.²

As the reading from Hebrews reminds us this morning, the experience of God's people through the ages has never been far from adversity:

THEY...SUFFERED TORTURE, MOCKING, FLOGGING, CHAINS AND IMPRISONMENT.
THEY WERE STONED TO DEATH, SAWN IN TWO, 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.

The desire of Roman Christians to bury their dead NOT by way of cremation—the Roman custom—but through direct burial of the body was another thing that marked them as different.

Roman law required Christians to purchase land outside the city for burying their dead, and the least expensive parcels were the expanses of tuffa at Callixtus and elsewhere.³ In the first three centuries a half-million Christians had been buried here.

As we left the stifling heat and followed our guide into the cool, subterranean passageways of the catacombs, we were getting as close as possible to the first generations of people with whom we shared a common faith and a common destiny.

The symbols we saw painted on the walls and ceilings of some of the family tombs—fish and shepherds, lamps and doves—became infused with new meaning as Christians used them to express their faith in a God/Man who'd suffered the worst form of death Rome ever conceived—crucifixion—and had been vindicated by God in his resurrection on the third day.

The story of Jesus and the experience of his followers through the ages have never been far from adversity.

¹ A sermon I preached on the Fifth Sunday of Lent, 2015 pairs this same illustration with a different text.

² See the Christian Catacombs of Rome website: <http://www.catacombe.roma.it/en/simbologia.php>

³ The main architect assigned to the task of building these subterranean tombs was named Callixtus and the name stuck.

So, there is a sense in which the harsh words coming from Jesus' mouth today tell the truth about the cost of discipleship...

Yet still these words bite our ears. Divided families; households riven apart! A baptism by fire! Every sentence has an exclamation point, every word sizzles and pops with intensity.

When you were called into God's covenant people, grafted onto Christ, did you have any idea you were signing up for this?

Jesus speaks of human division NOT as an unfortunate byproduct of faithful living but as an intentional plan on his part—SO WHAT GIVES?!

Our family has been glued to primetime Olympics coverage in Rio for much of the last week. It's hard to leave the room when Michael Phelps is about to swim or Simone Biles is about to start a routine. Gold medal fever is contagious. We all love winners—especially when triumph over adversity is part of the story line.

Watching competitors win—especially (for me at least) the older ones—is like a kind of drug. It's intoxicating. And NBC has the formula down for setting the stage and reeling us in.

- The camaraderie and perfection of the U.S. women's gymnastics team,
- the record setting performances of Katie Ledecky,
- the achievements of Simone Manuel,
- the unblemished record of volleyballers Kerry Walsh Jennings and April Ross.

These performances give us a sense that things in this world may not be bad as we thought; that in spite of doping accusations, the threat of Zika, and the systemic troubles facing Brazil, the system, by and large, still works.

**And then Jesus strides into the room and starts spewing fire...
A bit of context, I think, is helpful here.**

Remember, Luke writes his gospel just 10 years after the Roman siege of Jerusalem of 70AD.

After decades of trying various ways to tame and manage Jewish uprisings and resistance the Empire struck back with a withering onslaught that left not one stone of Jerusalem standing.

- Anything of value was taken, everything else was burned.
- Fields and vineyards were sown with salt, survivors scattered, and exiles, after marching in chains to Rome, were put to work building what would become the Empire's preeminent symbol of violent excess: The Colosseum.⁴

Jewish Christians were put on notice: going against the Roman juggernaut by following the life and teachings of a poor Jewish carpenter would be risky business!

In the chaotic aftermath of that scene, Luke's Jesus pulls no punches when it comes to the true costs of discipleship. He knew exactly where the road he was on was heading.

I HAVE A BAPTISM WITH WHICH TO BE BAPTIZED,
AND WHAT STRESS I AM UNDER UNTIL IT IS COMPLETED!

⁴ On the Titus Arch, which stands between the Colosseum and the Forum in Rome, figures of Jewish slaves in chains are depicted carrying booty from the Jerusalem Temple back to Rome. You can find out more at <http://www.ancient.eu/article/499/>

Jesus names a truth about God’s agenda for the world that is hard for our ears to hear: God did not become flesh among us in order to endorse our versions of the truth.

God is after something much deeper—a reclamation project that looks the underbelly of human ambition square in the eye and challenges the powers of darkness at their very core.

There will be no pseudo–peace and no pseudo–community as far as Jesus is concerned. All must be stripped down, the foundations laid bare, before God’s reclamation project proceeds.

I CAME TO BRING FIRE TO THE EARTH, AND HOW I WISH IT WERE ALREADY KINDLED!

Enter Richard Rohrer, who writes:

“Authentic God experience always “burns” you, yet [it] does not destroy you, just as the burning bush did [not destroy] Moses. But most of us are not prepared for such burning, nor even told to expect it... By definition, authentic God experience is always “too much”! [For it] consoles our True Self only after it has devastated our false self.⁵

What we hear in today’s gospel assaults our sensibilities.

Yet, somewhere within us there is a murmur of recognition that, yes, the false self, the old structures of this world and old patterns of our lives, must be dismantled before new ones can be erected in their place.

Many of us are in various stages of rebuilding in our lives.

- Some of us have learned that our original parts (knees, shoulders, hips, hearts) don’t last as long as we’d hoped.
- Some of us have been going through a rehabilitation of sorts in our family relationships.
- Some of us are waiting on the next set of test results from our doctor, and we’ve been turning the house upside down looking for the warrantee we’re sure was tucked away somewhere.
- **And some of us...**some of us are just on the other side of a baptism by fire, and we’re starting to feel good some of the time, and ready to make a go at life again.

Whatever the particulars of our experience, we need the presence of a Savior who loves us enough to tell us the truth about ourselves and our condition, and to show us a new way to live.

That truth is—the OLD SELF must be torn down, must die—before a NEW SELF can live.

This is a harsh reality; a baptism by fire. But it becomes GOOD NEWS when we realize that Jesus never consigns us to the junkyard, but accompanies us at each stage of rebuilding.

It’s GOOD NEWS when we realize he has already gone through the fire for us; and, having been raised up by God, offers himself to us again and again—each week here at this Table.

The death of the old and the birth of the new becomes GOOD NEWS when we realize we are not alone, but are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses, a community of saints and sinners, fellow pilgrims with whom we have been given the Holy Spirit, and with whom we are finding new life.

Jesus loves us enough to tell us the truth about ourselves and our world, and this is just the beginning.

⁵ Richard Rohrer, *Falling Upward: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life*. (San Francisco: Jossey-Base, 2011) p. 13.

Where do we go from here?

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,
LOOKING TO JESUS THE PIONEER AND PERFECTOR OF OUR FAITH,

WHO FOR THE SAKE OF THE JOY THAT WAS SET BEFORE HIM ENDURED THE CROSS,
DISREGARDING ITS SHAME, AND HAS TAKEN HIS SEAT AT THE RIGHT HAND OF THE
THRONE OF GOD.

Amen.