

Sermon
St. Mary's Nanoose
August 14, 2016.
Hebrews 11:29-12:2 & Luke 12:49-56

In our reading from Hebrews today, we learn about the faith of our Christian community through time. Faith does not mean having an easy time; faith means having the courage to live by your convictions and being willing to accept the consequences of a life lived out of faith. For some of those who came before us, a life of faith expressed itself in amazing deeds. For others, a life of faith involved suffering and death. For yet others, both.

The point being that a life of faith is a life of choice, a way of moving forward day by day, built strong in relationship with God, trusting where one is being guided.

Jesus tells us in the reading from Luke that the rewards of a life lived in God are so very different than the rewards of this world. This reading could make a person really uncomfortable. And rightly so! Fire, division, family strife!?! There's no way to pretend this is lovey-dovey stuff. This is a tough reading. And needs to be respected as such.

If God has given us free will, then we are free to make choices that others may not like. The kind of free will I'm talking about here is not license to do whatever we like, ignoring the impact we're having on others. No, as Christians we clearly have guidelines as to what behaviours serve life and serve God; and which ones don't and should

be avoided. But within this framework, people have the right and responsibility to make choices about their own lives. And those choices necessarily will bring conflict and division. So acknowledging that conflict is a part of life, how do we take responsibility for our choices and actions?

Going back to Hebrews and Paul's "great cloud of witnesses," we can easily think of Christians throughout history whose choices upset the people around them.

The first person who comes to my mind is St. Francis. Francis was born in the late 12th century into a wealthy Italian family. His father was a silk merchant. Francis lived a life of privilege. In 1204, he became seriously ill and entered a time of spiritual crisis. After that, he denounced his life of privilege, giving away all his belongings. This enraged his father. He steered away from the indulgent pastimes of his friends and they began to avoid him. More and more he began to hang out with the poor, spending hours in prayer and responding to the nudgings of the Holy Spirit.

We can romanticize Francis but that doesn't serve us. Francis interpreted the "present time of his age," and became a servant of God – rebuilding the church, revitalizing the faith of thousands bringing hope, faith and integrity back into people's lives. His life wasn't easy; but that wasn't his goal. His goal was God's. His life was based on his faith and unfolded out of that faith. Many didn't like him; many felt threatened by his choices.

And that is what Jesus is talking about. Our choices to follow God may threaten, stir up, and challenge those who are committed to lives based on earthly pleasures and goals. We can't control that. But we are promised that our God walks with us as we make difficult choices, and align our lives more and more with the Divine will. This is not the kind of love our culture likes to portray. This is not a Disney movie. This is not about "happiness" in the shallow sense.

What Jesus is talking about is making choices based on our desire to freely follow him; and when we do, two things will be true – there will be conflict, and, we will be given the faith to persevere.

The love God offers is not an easy love; it is a love that changes us. We have the choice to enter into, or stay in, relationship with God or not. God does not force anyone into relationship. That would not be free will. No choice is without consequence. When Jesus says, as we heard in the reading from Luke, "Why do you not know how to interpret the present time?" - is he asking us to consider what a world divorced from the One who created it is like, and where it might be headed? These are important questions to consider. How *do* we interpret the present time, and more importantly, how do we respond?

If conflict is an obvious and necessary aspect of free will, how do we deal with this conflict? We live in an age where more and more powerful and sophisticated weapons are being developed in the so-called effort to bring about peace and safety and security for all. We

just have to turn on the TV to see how much violence has permeated the fabric of our lives.

Wouldn't we just love to wipe out conflict? - to find a way to make the lion lie down with the lamb? In our desire for peace, we often gloss over the differences between people; we think we can pretend them away if we're only nice enough.

I remember a rupture in my family of origin that stunned everyone. Five adult children and their spouses and children were planning a celebration for our parents' 70th birthdays. Interestingly enough, I can't for the life of me remember what sparked the fight, but all of a sudden, in a family where anger was verboten, all hell broke loose. Siblings said nasty and hurtful things to each other, they yelled, they slammed down phones, they threatened, shamed, blamed and punished each other. It was a remarkable show of fury, colourful language and childishness. I don't think any of us knew we had it in us! As the peacemaker of the family, I ventured out to mend bridges. I'm someone who has never liked conflict so my response is to make peace at any cost. I ventured out too soon - really if I'm honest, for my own needs and not those of the others - and received the wrath of those still licking their wounds. I arrogantly assumed I knew the path to peace and was going to show the others the way. This was a wonderful, albeit painful, learning experience for me. I learned that I can't create peace; I can only offer the olive branch, with a willingness to listen to the other's pain. *Because it's only in relationship that we*

can build peace. The good news is that my family weathered the storm and we are all closer as a result. Thank God.

One of the guest lecturers at seminary made the statement in class that Jesus calls us to love our enemies; not like them. One of my classmates put up his hand, "I beg to disagree. I think we are called to learn to like our enemies. Loving them can be a superficial, arrogant thing." My heart opened at Chris' words. I knew he spoke the truth. It's only in attempting to understand the other that we can move through conflict to true peace. And then we can love others in a real way.

We have been given the ability to extend peace; Scripture tells us that. But it's not an easy peace; it's the willingness to open our hearts in the desire to understand another person; to move beyond our assumptions and judgments. To be willing to understand that others make the choices they need to make and they may be so very different from the choices we make.

Look at whom Jesus ate with. Not the people who lived as he did; not the people who had what he had. No, Jesus came to be with those who were rejected by others. Whose life circumstances had prompted them to make choices they might not have had their circumstances been different. Some had turned away from God. And there were those who were caught up in pursuing the material things in life. And of course, there were those who, wittingly or unwittingly, created suffering for those around them. Jesus wasn't afraid to engage

them all, even if it meant he was not liked, not remotely understood or respected and even when, it involved great danger to him. Jesus wasn't afraid of conflict. He had to challenge people to get them *to wake up and look at their lives*. A lot of people don't like the truth, don't value honesty and prefer the dark to the light. It takes courage and faith to live an honest, truthful life. It takes courage to truly love.

Love is not easy. Often, when we think we're the loving ones/ we're the peaceful ones, we discover in conversation, in relationship that we've missed the boat, that we haven't seen clearly, that we've been smug and arrogant, too comfortable.

Conflict is part of free will. How are we going to deal with it creatively, in ways that serve life and God? We can't make it go away. It doesn't serve to play small and not voice our truth, and, it doesn't work to use violence to try and make it go away once and for all. We have to find a different way.

Conflict means engaging. Conflict requires prayer. Conflict requires practice, skill and intent. A first step is accepting that conflict is a part of life; and most often it doesn't serve to try and avoid it.

Probably because of my parents' experience as survivors of WWII, I have always been acutely aware of conflict and very uncomfortable with it. I'm sure that's what led me into the study of Nonviolent Communication as a way of developing my ability to deal constructively with conflict. In fact, next weekend I'm offering a workshop titled *Conflict as Opportunity* to a group of Unitarians at a

summer camp near my home. I learn as I teach. And I have a lot to learn about conflict. We all do.

Conflict will be part of life when we try to live with integrity. Our community of St. Mary's is no exception. We each are created uniquely and have our own particular journey to make. As we share our own unique gifts, how do we do so with honesty, care and compassion? How do we offer real peace?

Jesus shows us the way - *a fierce commitment to God, and humility in our dealings with one another.*

Today as we share the sign of peace, let us do so with a real awareness – that we each are a unique creation, that we will inevitably have conflict, that conflict gives us the opportunity to grow in love, and that in this moment, we have been given the power to extend the peace of Christ. This is our choice.

The peace of Christ is always with you.

Amen.