Gaines Congregational United Church of Christ

August 18, 2019

Old Testament Reading; Isaiah 5: 1-7

Responsive Reading; Psalm 80: 1-2, 8-19

Epistle Reading; Hebrews 11: 29 – 12: 2

Gospel Reading; Luke 12: 49-56

**Sermon Title: THE GREAT DIVIDE**

**By Rev. Jim Gardner**

Summary: “My advice to an athlete would be to find a rival committed to bring you down. That rival will lift you up.”

JJ Watts

Many years ago, I started doing lay-sermons for various churches when their minister was on vacation or whatever. Even at that time I used to base my sermons on the lectionary scriptures to discipline myself and cause me to do better research and commit to excellence.

On one occasion the scripture was one from Timothy that advocated restricting women to the home, being silent in church and not having authority over any man.

This rubbed me wrong and so I went to my mother and asked her how she would preach on that scripture. She said,” I wouldn’t.”

That is very tempting for a pastor, but it would be negligent for a pastor not to try to equip his or her congregation with the ability to respond to a baby in the faith that might be scared away from the Bible if no one was willing to try to answer their questions.

In our gospel lesson today Christ says, “Do you suppose that I came to give peace on earth? I tell you, not at all, but rather division.” He then goes on to tell how his message would split up families,2 against 3, and 3 against 2. Father against son and son against father and so on.

This passage always bothered me right up to trying to use it today. For research I went to Believers Bible Commentary by William MacDonald which I found in our church library.

Their explanation was that this is not what Jesus wanted but this is what Jesus knew would happen.

This makes sense. The Jewish faith had stood the test of time in a world where they were a minority because they stood by their traditions. The combination of their traditions and their discipline transformed a religion into a way of life. Anyone messing with their way of life was going to experience serious push back.

Several times in Jewish history “new messiahs” came on the scene but their teachings died with them because they were not the real thing. We see this pointed out when the disciples are told not to preach the word and a wise Pharisee points out to his contemporaries the folly of false prophets that came before but this might be something different because the disciples did not quit when Jesus had been crucified. This temporarily saved the lives of the disciples but in no way ended the strife.

Anti-semitism has continued right up through the Holocaust, and it seems that anti-Christianity still exists all over the world.

Strife surely exists today and we see it raising its ugly head every day in the news. The thing is that strife does not have to end in catastrophe. We can use strife to lift our game.

Jews and Christians get along better now than at any time in history. I believe that is because what we have in common is more significant than our differences.

Christ was asked what was the great commandment and he answered, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind, and strength and the second is like unto it. Love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments are based all the laws of God.”

These are Jewish commandments reinforced by Christ and Christianity. If this country would follow these there would be so much less strife in our homes, our shopping centers and in our politics. Notice this does not say, “Agree with your neighbor”, it “says LOVE your neighbor.”

When I was a kid, I was passionate in my beliefs and out of control in my reactions to other beliefs. My father tried to help me get it together by telling me that I would never win an argument by raising my voice or calling people names. Dad told me that when someone said something that I disagreed with to think of ten arguments why that person was right and then figure out ten logical rebuttals to the statement I disagreed with. I think that ten would be impossible but three might be a good number. Any who, Dad encouraged a sensible controlled response.

In my high school we did not have a debate team, but when I went to college, I became acquainted with the concept. When a debate team goes into competition, they know the topic ahead of time but do not know whether they will be arguing for or against it. If a person is adamantly for something but is assigned the opposite point of view, they have to put their feelings aside and present good logical points and rebuttals to win. We need more debate team members in government and in everyday life.

Now back to the commandments. Love God, and love your neighbor.

I think it needs to be said here that we have a remarkable God. There is no Sin so great that God can not forgive it. We all know that, but there is a flip side. There is no sin so minor that God can ignore it.

I know that in this church I may be preaching to the choir but sometimes the choir needs to be encouraged to sing the truth.

OK, back to the point, when we throw something at someone with the intent to hurt them, we are not “loving our neighbor”. It does not matter what we are throwing, if we are throwing words, or milk shakes, or punches, or kicks, or rocks, or bullets, or IEDs, it is all the same sin. Oh, there is that nasty word that we do not like to use in church. Not loving your neighbor is a serious sin that cannot be ignored by God. Our laws differentiate between killing someone and hurting their feelings but God doesn’t. We all do it from time to time but we need to recognize what we are doing and try to avoid it and to encourage those around us, both young and old, to refrain from hateful practices. We also need to not write someone off for falling short of the glory but to forgive them as we want God to forgive us. We also need to see what God says that we should do about it.

That said we shall now read the Old Testament lesson and our responsive reading. We can put the Hallelujah and amen at the end of the Psalm.