

The Strength to Persevere

Pentecost 10 (Proper 15C)

Written by Barbara Toman

August 14, 2022

Tough words, on a soft summer morning in Minnesota. Fire brought to the earth, family members divided against one another, and Jesus calling out hypocrites. I must confess, when I began reflecting on this Gospel, I felt pulled in opposite directions: wanting (with humility) to clarify and contextualize Jesus's words but also not wanting to let us off the hook too easily.

So let me try to do both — to help us wrap our minds around a bit of Gospel that we'd probably rather not hear, but that we need to hear.

First, I feel it's important to understand that Jesus isn't taking gleeful pleasure in setting fire to the earth and dividing families. This is not about hellfire and destruction and judgment from on high. Way back in Genesis, God promised Noah that he would never again destroy creation, right? And for me, the God I meet in Scripture and in my life, every day, loves all people. Not a God of destruction.

So what *is* Jesus talking about?

Maybe not about what should be, but about what *is*. Context matters: The writers of this Gospel were speaking to a young church struggling with persecution by the authorities. Choosing to be part of this young church, to seek to live into God's vision for what human life can be, as shown in Jesus, probably did pit family members against one another. That was their reality. And the writers of this Gospel wanted the faithful to persevere, in the face of these sad divisions.

What about us, *our* reality in our own time? What can this story possibly say to us?

I see in this passage an urgent call for each of us to consider how we are to be as we live a short while on this earth. How are we to be?

The prophet Micah — in a passage we didn't read today — reminds us: "He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?"

It's about living as children of God. Living not for ourselves alone, but for others. Telling the truth, safeguarding God's creation, showing passionate concern for the poor and the oppressed, finding and living out that combination of contemplation and action — in short, keeping God at the absolute center of our lives.

It isn't easy. We all know that. The divisions, the struggles that hang over this reading — that is what it can feel like sometimes, to follow that way of life. Maybe now, more so than at any time in our lives that we can remember. But this way of living is important enough that Jesus likens the commitment to a fire kindled beneath us. It is a vision of what can be, when we live ardently as children of God.

So how are we to live into God's vision for us, for who we are meant to be? The Letter to the Hebrews offers some guidance. In one of the most beautiful passages in Scripture — I say that all the time, don't I?

— we hear, "Because we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses ... let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us ..."

"Because we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses": We are not alone. We live in community, with one another and with the saints who have gone before us.

"Let us run with perseverance": Where do we find the strength to persevere? We all have different ways. For me, it is contemplative practices: deep prayer that feeds my spirit and, I pray, gives me wisdom and strength to feed others — to act in this world. To give generously of myself, in ways large and small.

However we manage it, we are called to transform ourselves — to live as God has created us to live. That's what's behind these tough lessons. It isn't about us judging other people, or God consigning us to hellfire and damnation. It's the call to that wholeness and completeness that living in union with God — that Oneness with God — can bring. It's the call to present such new lives to the world in whatever ways we are able.

That is what it means to live as children of God. Maybe especially in tough times. Amen.

--Barbara Toman