

Tenth Sunday after Pentecost – Proper 15, Year C
 August 17, 2025
 St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Cleveland Heights
 The Rev. Dr. Stephen H. Applegate

+In the Name of God: who was, and is, and is to come. Amen

Jesus said, “Do you think that I have come to bring peace on the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division! Luke 12:51

When I was in college – a looong time ago – the college chaplain, a fellow named Joel Tibbets, had the impossible task of trying to engage college students who were mostly preoccupied with other things. Joel tried the approaches college chaplains at the time usually did – and in my experience usually still do: He held a weekly Protestant Chapel services that he planned with interested students. And he offered weekly get-togethers with tea and cookies and conversation – all with limited success.

But, one year, Joel came up with a brilliant idea for a program that was very successful. It was a program he called, “The Last Sermon,” and here’s the way it worked. He invited various members of the faculty and the administration to preach one last sermon – a sermon they would have preached if they never had the opportunity like it again.

This idea captivated the student body. We were desperately curious to hear what someone like Sid Wertimer, the econ professor would have to say, or Ed Barrett, who taught Shakespeare, or Rand Carter, the Art History prof who, parenthetically, once referred to a certain ugly contemporary architectural style as “motel moderne.”

None of us knew if any of those who had agreed to participate in the “last sermon” program were religious at all, but that just intrigued us all the more. What, if anything, did Channing Bullfinch Richardson, the history professor, believe? Or “Digger” Graves, or “Dead” Endy? We had to know, so we went to “The Last Sermon.” And we were not disappointed.

This morning marks the last time I will preach a sermon as your Interim Rector. So, I was tempted to try to preach a “last sermon.” But that was going to involve a lot more pressure than I wanted. So, I’ll simply try to make sense of the scriptures and suggest how they are relevant for these times.

These are tough lessons for any Sunday, but especially for my last Sunday as your interim rector. The Isaiah passage is full of God’s disappointment at what his “vineyard” hasn’t produced – with the word “vineyard” meaning the people of Israel.

And the passage from Luke’s Gospel starts with fire, if not brimstone, and then it goes on to talk about the divisions that will affect every possible kind of family relationship: fathers against sons, sons against fathers, mothers against daughters, and daughters against mothers. The divisions

will ripple out further from these closest of family relationships to include the in-laws and the other family members that our family refers to as the outlaws.

Barbara Brown Taylor preached a sermon about this passage from Luke's Gospel years ago and wryly entitled it, "Family Values." Imagine the feuds, she said: "father and son against each other, mother and daughter against each other, son's wife and son's mother at each other's throats – a whole house full of slamming doors and meals swallowed in stony silence – all because of Jesus."

You can see why I considered preaching about the Collect of the Day instead of the lessons. But I'm not going to duck the lessons – at least I'm not going to duck the Gospel reading this morning just because it's a tough one. The challenging readings are the ones we most need to understand. And since this is my last sermon here, what have I got to lose?

A long time ago – back in 1965 – the Anglican Church of Canada asked a noted television personality and journalist named Pierre Berton to write a report on the state of the church. Berton was well-known. He had a talk show on TV.

He had written extensively on popular culture, Canadian history, anthologies, children's books, and historical works for youth. He had, for lack of a better description, "street cred."

So, there were logical reasons for the leadership of the Anglican Church in Canada to ask someone of his name recognition to write the report. The church probably hoped that whatever he wrote would be read by a lot of people rather than just sitting on a shelf somewhere as such reports often do.

On the other hand, the choice of Pierre Berton was something of a surprise. You see, Berton was an atheist. He wasn't a believer. He wasn't a churchgoer. But then, I suppose, who better to write a report on the church than someone who was an atheist? If the report turned out to be favorable, no one could say – well, the author is a church member. What would you expect from a person in his position?

In the end, the Anglican Church of Canada got what they hoped for. The book was widely read and even more widely discussed. But the church's request also backfired. The book turned out to be a scathing report of the church as being completely irrelevant to society. Berton gave the book a title that soon became a catch phrase.

The book's title was *The Comfortable Pew*. When Berton called the church a "comfortable pew," he meant it as an insult and not a compliment. He saw a church that was interested only in its own comfort and not committed to making a difference in the world.

Pierre Berton wrote that the language and liturgy of the church was outmoded, inaccessible, and irrelevant. Sermons, he said, "had nothing to say" to people who were living in the mid-1960's.

When he interviewed people who no longer attended church and asked them why they didn't go anymore, they told him that the service "did nothing for them," that the liturgy was "dull and old-

fashioned,” the words archaic, the sermons cliché-ridden, the organ music “square,” and the congregation spiritless.

The clergy came in for Pierre Berton’s harshest criticism. Most clergymen – and they were all men at the time – were interested in “success” rather than faithfulness. He said that if someone could balance a budget, expand facilities, and act as a good executive while developing the relatively innocuous skills of the pulpit – that person would be sought out by better-appointed parishes because of his proven abilities in what Berton called the Numbers Game – capital “N,” capital “G.” The book was 150 pages long – 150 pages of caustic criticism, and it stung.

We – and here I’m talking about my fellow clergy and me – are usually good at “comforting the afflicted.” We are usually good at providing pastoral care to people during times of sadness, or sickness, or the loss of someone they love.

We typically aren’t as good, however, at “afflicting the comfortable” – at challenging our parishioners.

And that is where the Gospel reading this morning comes in. If anything should afflict those of us sitting in our comfortable pews, it’s Jesus’s clear message that following him comes at a cost, and that failing to interpret what’s going on now in our country and our world is a recipe for disaster. “You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present time?” Jesus asked his disciples. He asks us the same question.

Have we ever thought about what it really costs to go to church? What do you suppose you and your fellow St. Paul’s members would say if we asked them that? It costs a free Sunday morning? A chance to sleep in? The ten or twenty bucks that we put in the offering plate? The fact is that it costs us very little to be a Christian today, even in an increasingly “post-Christian” culture.

Such was not the case in Jesus’ day. Those who followed him were regularly thrust into conflict and division, often with their own family members.

To follow Jesus was to question the religious and economic, and even political, status quo. It meant accepting as Messiah someone who looked nothing like what their culture held out as powerful or important.

What Jesus reminds us is that God sends us out, as he has sent out others before us, to proclaim God’s justice which is God’s love in action. This is the kind of life that takes real courage, especially when the loudest voices these days spew bigotry, hatred, and intolerance, and when someone who is “different” or “other” is seen to be an existential threat – a danger to be deported, eliminated or, at least, contained. And when the contradictory values of love and hate collide, conflict of the kind that’s described in this morning’s Gospel is inevitable. We cannot walk the way of love with Jesus of Nazareth and, at the same time, make peace with oppression

In the same year, *The Comfortable Pew* was published in Canada, 1965, a young seminarian from the Episcopal Theological School in Cambridge, Massachusetts, answered a televised appeal of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. to come to Selma, Alabama, to help secure the right to vote for all citizens.

His name was Jonathan Myrick Daniels. Sponsored by the Episcopal Society for Cultural and Racial Unity, Daniels took a leave of absence from his studies and went south.

He was jailed on August 14, sixty years ago this past Thursday, for joining a picket line. Jonathan and his companions were unexpectedly released that same day. Aware that they were in danger, four of them – Daniels, a Roman Catholic priest, and two young black women, walked to a small store in Hayneville, Alabama.

As sixteen-year-old Ruby Sales reached the top step of the entrance to the store, a man with a gun appeared, cursing her. Daniels pulled her to one side to shield her. He was killed by a blast from a 12-gauge shotgun fired by the man – an unemployed highway worker.

Jonathan Daniels was martyred because he believed, as an article of faith, that all nations and races were “indelibly and unspeakably one.” He is one of fifteen people memorialized in the Chapel of Saints and Martyrs at Canterbury Cathedral.

No comfortable pew for Jonathan Myrick Daniels. No comfortable pew for the holy apostles Peter and Paul. None for those who have been the lights of the world in their generations – who faced down evil and stood up for what was right. None for those who witness to the power of God’s love today in places where the cost of discipleship continues to be terribly high.

Inspired by their witness we pray, “Jesus, make these comfortable pews a lot less comfortable this morning. Jar us out of our complacency. Help us interpret the present time. Show us the work you have for us to do. And help us answer the call to follow you no matter the cost.”

Amen.