

Luke 12:49-59  
Wrecking Ball  
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Everyone have a fairly normal week? Any major life events? I had something interesting happen, Tuesday morning I woke up early, around 5am with a crippling pain in my abdomen, something I have never experienced before, and it only seem to be getting worse. As it was not something I could sleep off, I called Denise, who came over to sit with the kids while I drove myself to the Emergency Room. As you can imagine, there is an extra measure of anxiety surrounding physical health in my life right now, so I was pretty scared. But after a little pain medication and a CAT Scan I learned that it was nothing more than a Kidney Stone. Let me tell you that I have never been so excited for a kidney stone as I was then.

It was, however, very painful. The Apostle Paul speaks in 2 Corinthians 12 about a thorn in his flesh—some think it was his poor eye sight. This thing has been a thorn, literally in my side. I actually gave the little bugger a name, I've taken to calling my jagged little calcium formation John Calvin. Like the 16<sup>th</sup> Century Reformer this thing has a prickly personality, and it seems to cause irritation and challenges at least once a day.

Then I started reading this week's passage from Luke and found that my kidney stone may be something of a helpful metaphor for the passage that we're going to read this week. In this morning's text Jesus has a prickly worded warning for his followers. And what we will hear is Jesus' refusal to fit neatly into our categories, his kingdom is always one that overturns our expectations and frustrates our perceptions.

So let's listen to these closing verses from Luke 12, beginning at verse 49.

**“I came to cast fire on the earth, and would that it were already kindled! <sup>50</sup> I have a baptism to be baptized with, and how great is my distress until it is accomplished! <sup>51</sup> Do you think that I have come to give peace on earth? No, I tell you, but rather division. <sup>52</sup> For from now on in one house there will be five divided, three against two and two against three. <sup>53</sup> They will be divided, father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law.”**

**He also said to the crowds, “When you see a cloud rising in the west, you say at once, ‘A shower is coming.’ And so it happens. <sup>55</sup> And when you see the south wind blowing, you say, ‘There will be scorching heat,’ and it happens. <sup>56</sup> You hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present time?**

**“And why do you not judge for yourselves what is right? <sup>58</sup> As you go with your accuser before the magistrate, make an effort to settle with him on the way, lest he drag you to the judge, and the judge hand you over to the officer, and the officer put you in prison. <sup>59</sup> I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the very last penny.”**

So, I wonder if, in today's text, if Jesus doesn't have a Kidney Stone. Clearly he has a burr in his saddle, because this is Jesus with a much harder edge, he's not the gentle shepherd, nor is he the sage teacher. No, Jesus is worked up. And I think we had better pay close attention, because this is the side of Jesus that only emerges when something really important is about to happen.

Luke 12 is a pivotal chapter. Jesus gives warnings on the hypocrisy of the Pharisees; he addresses those who confess and who deny and how God will deal with them individually; he sprinkles in a parable of the dangers of money; and a warning about falling asleep at the proverbial wheel when it comes to our walk with God. Now today in the final ten verses Jesus cautions those who would sanitize his Kingdom message of its sharp edge.

In these verses there are people around Jesus who are just trying to "make nice" by minimizing the controversy in his message. Perhaps they were polite religious people, who were working to promote harmony among the various groups: Come on Jesus, can't we all just get along?; I mean we have more similarities than dissimilarities; Live and let live; agree to disagree so we can all start pulling in the same direction. It's just religion. I mean there are people out there looking at us, don't you want a compelling public image?

To which Jesus says, "Not on those terms." Over in John chapter 18 when Jesus is on trial before Pilate, he asks Are you the King of the Jews, to which Jesus responds, "do you ask this on your own account or did others tell you about me? Jesus responds, **My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting, that I might not be delivered over to the Jews. But my kingdom is not from the world.**

There had been talk about how Jesus should make things nicer and smoother because from the looks of these verses, Jesus is doing nothing of the sort. What is very clear from his tone is that Jesus did not come to prop up our old ways. He did not come to perpetuate more of the same. Jesus did not come to help you do better, or be better, or live better. He didn't come to help you become a new and improved version of you.

Anyone remember this character? This is Stuart Smalley, and what did Stuart Smalley say every week? "You're good enough, you're smart enough, and doggonit, people like you." Stuart interviews Michael Jordan, Michael I know you must lie awake at night and think to yourself, I'm not good enough, everybody's better than me, I'm not going to score and points, I have no business playing this game. Michael, denial ain't just a river in Egypt. Michael those negative thoughts are just your inner critical spirit and I want to replace them with a daily affirmation. "I'm good enough, I'm smart enough, and doggonit, people like me." All this to the greatest basketball player in history.

We snicker, but when it comes down to it, this is the message a lot of people think is coming from Jesus. You're good enough, you're smart enough, and doggonit people like you. While it may not be untruth, this is not the message we're getting from Jesus today.

Verse 49 begins with a blaze. **"I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled. I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what stress I am under until it is completed."** Jesus is talking about his own death, as the crucified messiah. His baptism was a baptism into that death. Jesus is saying to his disciples and to the crowds, I'm not here to cheer you on, I'm here to take you by the hand and invite you to come and die—die the death of sin, the death

of division, the death of self-absorption, the death of pride and envy and jealousy and malice. Jesus is not inviting us to follow him so that he can help you become a better you. Jesus is inviting you to join him in baptism, the baptism of death to self, so that with him you might be raised, renewed, reconciled, resurrected in life.

While baptism is a sign of our inclusion into the family of God, an indicator of who we belong to, and reception of his cleansing spiritual waters, it is also a sign of death. Baptism is the wrecking ball that demolishes the notions of self-salvation, self-importance, self-elevation. In our baptisms we journey with Jesus into the very lowest places of death, where sin resides and is cast off, so that with Jesus we may rise to new life, not improved life, but new life, perfect life, his life.

To perceive Jesus as a sort of bland, mushy, self-help guru, is to completely misperceive him and his kingdom. Also, to perceive Jesus as the one who is alongside to bless our activities, our social and political aspirations, our causes, is to miss the purpose of his kingdom. Jesus' Kingdom will always frustrate and be in conflict with our ways of life, because the way to his kingdom always resides above our idols of self, society, and nation.

I had an interesting idea for a social experiment. We often see these two flags together out there in public. And for some reason I always see the American Flag flying above the "Christian Flag" (which only goes back about 80 years, and do we really even need a Christian flag?). But I thought once about reversing the order in which these two hang on a flag pole, putting the American Flag below the Christian Flag and see if that sparks comment or discussion.

Because what Jesus is saying here is that my kingdom will invariably put those who truly seek it in conflict and at enmity with those around them. He says: **"From now on in one house there will be five divided, three against two and two against three. <sup>53</sup> They will be divided, father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law."**

And what Jesus is saying is that interpreting the times and seasons when this will happen is not a difficult thing, it's as easy as saying look at that western cloud rolling in, looks like rain. Or the hot south wind, bet we're in for a hot one. But apparently this message was still lost on them, because they thought that the inbreaking of the Kingdom of God meant more of the same, the old-time religion warmed over.

Jesus said, you can only serve one master, you cannot have God and mammon, you cannot have Jesus and your career, Jesus and your possessions, Jesus and your politics, Jesus and your patriotism. Because following Jesus will invariably reveal our propensity to make idols of everything in this world. Calvin is famous for saying that the hearts of men and women are a perpetual factory of idols. Jesus does not promise blessing when competing allegiances divide his people from one another, and keep his people from the fullness of life with him.

But the truth of the Gospel, the whole truth is that the kingdom Jesus was bringing represents this world inverted. This is a point Luke the evangelist has been making from the get-go in this gospel. Anyone who thinks that Jesus' advent would represent the same-old, same-old need only read Mary's "Magnificat" in Luke 1. Mary foresaw with startling clarity the reversal of the way things normally go as the poor get elevated and the rich get sent away empty-handed.

Anyone who saw the kingdom of God as representing “business as usual” was misreading the signs just as surely as someone who saw a dark cloud and predicted sunshine or who grabbed a parka on account of a strong southerly breeze.

Jesus knew that the announcement of this kingdom would have collateral damage, even to the point of tearing people’s lives and their families apart. He certainly was not particularly eager to see such mayhem but what he clearly *was* eager to see was the arrival of the kingdom itself. Jesus clearly expresses a deep desire to see the fire kindled because he knew better than anyone how badly this world needs the fire of renewal that God’s kingdom brings. And if that new kingdom could come in no other way than to cause the conflict Jesus foresees, then that was the way it would have to be. The main thing was that the kingdom would come.

C.S. Lewis once observed that even Christian people sometimes think that being a follower of Jesus is like being a horse that gets trained to run a little faster than it used to run. But in reality, Lewis wrote, “Jesus doesn’t want a regular horse that can run more swiftly—he wants to give the horse wings and teach it how to fly!”

But the Gospel tends to cut across boundaries, especially the boundaries we set up in our lives that allow Jesus access to somethings but not another. God you can have Sunday morning, but I get Saturday night (and maybe Monday-Friday too). Jesus you can be my religion, but when it comes to how I spend my time, my money, who I give my support to and the causes I pursue, how I vote, or what I do in my leisure time, I’ll take care of that. But what we read in this morning’s text is that the Kingdom cuts against the grain, zig-zagging its way through our lives. It’s not always clean, and it will invariably alienate and separate, wreaking havoc in one way or another.

Millard Fuller was pretty near the apex of an American success story. He was a high-octane corporate executive working eight days a week and pulling down a huge salary. But then one day he heard God calling to him, telling him his life was overfull and his priorities out of whack. So in prayer with his wife one day, Fuller re-committed his life to Christ. He quit his job, moved to a more modest house, and wondered what to do next. What he ended up doing next was building affordable houses for low-income families who could purchase these homes interest-free. Today we are most of us well aware of the great good Habitat for Humanity has done.

A preacher once re-counted Fuller’s story but was later approached by someone who asked, “How old were Fuller’s children when he quit his job like that?” It took this preacher a minute but then he realized the subtext of the question: how dare Fuller uproot his kids and subject them to a less lavish lifestyle just so that he could serve God?!

Who, after all, would make such a choice . . . ?