

“Choosing Sides”

Luke 12: 49-56

12th Sunday after Pentecost/ August 19, 2007

Lynne M. Dolan

How many of you are fans of the Harry Potter series? Many people, young and not so young have read all the Harry Potter books. Many folks even waited in line at midnight recently to purchase the latest and purportedly last installment in the saga. This week I felt a little like one of those rabid Harry Potter fans only the object of my passion is not Harry Potter but a singer named Lori McKenna. Lori is a singer/songwriter from Stoughton, MA who performed here at South Church three years ago. We have Karen Ziel to thank for introducing her to us. Lori performed in our first annual Youth in Mission concert. I was a fan from the moment I heard her sing. Soon after she sang here, she was “discovered.” Lori had been singing and writing for many years throughout New England, however she had not yet put out a CD on a major music label. I am not entirely sure of all the details, but someone heard her music in Nashville and brought it to the attention of Faith Hill (a huge Country music star.) Faith then recorded three of Lori's' songs and the rest is history. Soon after the release of Faith Hill's CD “Fireflies” Lori appeared on the Oprah show and then began the process that led to the release of her new CD.

I was so excited to get Lori's CD that I ordered a copy online so that I would be sure to receive it before the release date of August 14th. When I opened the jacket to look at the songs, I was thrilled to see one I recognized. She had sung it in her performance here. The song is called “Falter.” Lori first recorded this song on a CD entitled, “Kitchen Tapes” which is a collection of songs Lori recorded at her kitchen table. As you can imagine, that version of the song is simply Lori and her guitar, unplugged and raw. In “Falter” Lori sings about a boy she knew in school. He was the kind of kid everyone talked about. He was different, he obviously had lots of troubles in his home life, and was likely sick in one way or another. Instead of getting to know this kid, everyone just ignored him. In the chorus of the song she wonders “why don't we all open up, knowing that we all falter, and when will we learn, when will we learn, to reach out for each other.”

When I heard the version of this song on her new CD I was sad. It was the same song, but it really wasn't the same. This version had been “prettified.” I am not sure that is even a word, in fact, I am certain it is not. But perhaps you know what I mean. In this version, there was now a whole ensemble of musicians providing background music to a song that spoke its truth most effectively in a single voice and acoustic guitar. The violins, cello, steel guitar and drums added a nullifying dimension to the music. It took an edgy message and made it “nice” almost “sweet.”

I am not sure what made the producers think this song needed to be “prettied up.” In prettying it up it lost its edge; it's power to make us confront a part of ourselves that we would rather overlook or ignore. Many of Lori's diehard fans hoped we wouldn't lose

the Lori we love to the “corporate music machine.” It is easy to lose one’s edge when you are now dancing to the beat of a whole new drummer. This can happen to all of us, even those of us in the ministry. We can feel the need to “prettify” our message when we become concerned about moving up, into a bigger church, a bigger pastorate, or perhaps a conference minister’s job. Can we really say what we need to say when we are worried about annual reviews and what people will say about us after church at the punch bowl?

What the producers did to Lori’s music is not unlike what we do to the message. Sometimes we prefer our gospel prettied up, easier to swallow. We would rather preach from a gospel that has been made more acceptable for the masses, one that won’t get us into too much trouble with our Senior Minister or Board of Deacons or the Conference Minister. This morning we don’t get a prettied up Jesus. This Jesus is anything but pretty although he speaks a truth we can not afford to ignore.

We know all kinds of methods to avoid hearing the hard truth. If we don’t want to hear bad news on television, turn it off. If we don’t like what are parents tell you, move hundreds of miles away and communicate on your own terms. Perhaps you are familiar with the communication skill some people call “selective hearing.” We do this a lot when we are kids. Your mom says “if you clean your room I’ll take you out for ice cream.” What you hear is “mom’s taking me for ice cream.” Or she might say, “if you get an A in math this semester, I will buy you a new baseball glove,” and immediately you brag to your friends about the “dope” new glove your mom is going to buy you. Selective hearing is not something we outgrow. There are many occasions where we hear what we want to hear and wonder why the message got so messed up in translation.

Selective hearing can be an issue in the Church as well. The author Juan Carlos Ortiz says that when it comes to reading the Bible, many people use “selective hearing” or in that case “selective reading” when we fail to read what he calls “the Fifth Gospel.” Ah, you thought there were only four gospels. Ortiz says, “open up your bible and look at the verses you have circled, highlighted and underlined...the verses like ‘for God so loved the world’ and ‘I am with you always’ and ‘nothing can ever separate you from God.’ It’s all right here in the four Gospels. But the verses you do not underline, the ones you do not circle or highlight or memorize; those are part of the Fifth Gospel.”

Today’s portion of Luke’s gospel would certainly be part of this Fifth Gospel. What we hear this morning is one of Jesus’ hard sayings. Who wants to hear that being a disciple will tear families apart? Who wants to choose between following Jesus and the love of one’s parents? The verses we just heard seem so troubling because they describe a Jesus that seems completely foreign to us. “Do you think I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division!” What happened to the Prince of Peace? What happened to the peace that passes all understanding or be not afraid? The Jesus we know tries to unite people, not divide them. Why would Jesus say that he has come to bring division and conflict?

The people to whom Jesus was speaking were still Jewish but had begun to follow Jesus. In that day, when Christianity was a radically new religion, people were despised for

following Jesus. If a Jew converted to Christianity, his family had a funeral for him, and he was disowned. I was speaking to a friend just the other day that is Jewish and married a Catholic man. Her family accepted her decision rather well, however, she has a friend from high school who did the same and was disowned by her family. Her mother did not speak to her again until her father died many years later. Only then did they reconcile. Jesus wanted his followers to understand the gravity of their decision. The easier choice would be to renounce their faith in Jesus and avoid all the conflict. There would be no shame in that. However, if they gave their lives to Jesus, everything would be different, very different.

There is a sense of urgency in what Jesus says to his disciples. He is running out of time with them. Jesus knows that his death is imminent and he desperately needs for them to understand what it is they will face. Keeping the faith won't be easy. Their fellow believers, these new Christians, will become their family. Their families of origin may not understand their choice, so they will have to rely on this new family. What Jesus says and what he teaches will make many people unhappy. In fact, it will ultimately lead to his death. He did not come to get along with the powers that be but to dismantle them. He did not come to make a few suggestions to make the world a better place, but to transform it into something no one had yet experienced.

The writer Teresa Berger believes that in fact, Jesus came to embody crisis. She writes about a woman named Lisa Fithian who seems to understand this call to embody crisis. Fithian is an activist with the global peace-oriented movement for social justice. She has been arrested 30 times for intentionally creating crises, for example situations that force the powers like transnational corporations, the media, security forces, consumers—to cease doing business as usual, examine the inequities that they may be perpetuating, and change policies. In an interview several years ago, Fithian explained: “When people ask me ‘what do you do?’ I say ‘I create crisis, because crisis is that edge where change is possible.’” Berger says, “I wonder, is that not what Jesus meant when he spoke of bringing fire to the earth? Did he not seek to bring crisis as ‘that edge where change is possible?’ Was he not saying as Lisa Fithian says, ‘I have come to bring crisis because business as usual means injustice and death?’” (From the article, “Disturbing the Peace,” by Teresa Berger, *The Christian Century*, August 10, 2004, p.18)

We may want, but we can not have a prettied up Jesus. As faithful, contemporary Christian we need to challenge ourselves to hear his message straight up, in all its raw splendor. The world is more complex today than in the first century, however we have not lost the need for a prophetic word. When we choose sides, we may lose a few friends. We may even anger members of our family. When we speak the truth we may lose those things we think are most important to us; family and friends, a job, or our social status. In a world where being a Christian is a conscious choice, many people may wonder why that choice is so important. However, it is no less necessary to make this choice today than it was 2000 years ago. When we are afraid to speak the truth we are in danger of losing something even more important than the things we have named. We are in danger of losing ourselves. In this dangerous, complex, God forsaken world, we can no longer keep silent. We must do as Jesus did. We must seek to embody crisis, “that

edge where change is possible.” May God give each one of us, the will and courage to follow wherever Jesus may call us and to speak the truth our community needs to hear. May it be so! Amen.

Sources: Teresa Berger, “Disturbing the Peace,” *The Christian Century*, August 10, 2004.

Steven Molin, “A Strange Sort of Peace,” 2004.