

The Tenth Sunday after Pentecost, Year C  
The Reverend D. S. Mote, PhD  
St Paul's Episcopal Church, Key West, FL  
August 14, 2022  
Isaiah 5:1-7  
Psalm 80:1-2, 8-18  
Hebrews 11:29-12:1  
Luke 12:49-56

## **Resilience, Fire, and Division**

Do you know what went on when you were being born? Do you know the source of your name? Do you know where some of your grandparents grew up?

These are three of the twenty questions on the “Do You Know?” scale created by Emory University professors Marshall Duke and Robyn Fivush in 2001 to ask children questions about their families. The purpose of the “Do You Know?” scale was to test the hypothesis that children who know more about their families are more resilient and can handle changes and challenges better than children who don't.

(Dr Fivush blogs about the “Do You Know?” scale here:

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-stories-our-lives/201611/the-do-you-know-20-questions-about-family-stories>.)

As they have used the “Do You Know?” scale over the years, Drs Duke and Fivush have observed high correlations between resilience in children and the stories children know about their people. In fact, children who know family stories that we might view as negative, stories about struggles and hardships and failures, as well as positive stories about successes and triumphs and joys in the history of their families appear to be the most resilient of all, the ones who know the good, the bad, and the ugly.

What accounts for this? The theory is that when we know we are part of a people who have endured hardship and found a way through, we have a clearer understanding that we too can find a way through the challenges of our own individual lives.

The reading from the Epistle to the Hebrews today reminds us of some of the people we come from. Even if you know next to nothing about your own family, if you are following Jesus, these people are your people. And if you know all kinds of stories and details perhaps even more than you would like to know about your family, as a Christ follower, these are your people, too.

These people recounted in the passage from Hebrews did all kinds of things, some really good things and some really terrible things. They suffered and excelled; they faced disappointment and adversity and knew success; they were injured and sometimes injured others. *And*, they were all made in God's image and were found acceptable by God. They were found acceptable by God not because they were so good or so particularly holy but because they lived by faith, which is to say, they walked in trust with God.

We descend from these people. They are our forebears in life and in faith. Hebrews describes them as "a great cloud of witnesses." Can you feel them? They're never so far away. Retired United Methodist bishop Will Willimon calls them "the bleacher people." They have kept the faith and finished their course on earth. And now they root for us as we complete our sojourns on this earth. Imagine them in a ginormous stadium, feeling for us when we stumble and doing the wave when we love like Jesus.

I was brought up by people who were farmers and who descended from generations of farmers. I know lots of stories about lots of them, including lots of stories about folks who died a long time before I was born. Like our ancient forebears described in the reading from Hebrews, my people were a pretty motley crew. Some were saintly. Some were hotheads. Some were, as we say back home, bad to drink. Up until my parents, none of them ever completed high school. But they survived droughts and wars and migrations and poverty and death of children in infancy and on and on and on.

And they had particular kinds of knowledge. They knew how to read the weather signs relevant to the rolling hills of the Georgia piedmont region where I'm from. Knowledge of some of these weather signs was passed down from them through my parents and aunts and uncles to me.

Because they were farmers, having knowledge of signs that predicted weather was crucial.

The communities Jesus preached and taught among in his earthly ministry and the communities to which the gospel of Luke was first addressed were largely agrarian peoples. Even if all of them weren't farmers themselves, they lived in agrarian economies. For them, weather signs were economic indicators. What happened to the crops in an area affected everyone profoundly.

In our day, many folks take note of other economic indicators. Many people in our country spend the majority of their hours indoors. They may know little of weather

signs and a whole lot about stock market fluctuations.

In today's gospel, Jesus has some words for folks who only pay attention to economic indicators and miss the bigger picture. He calls on his followers not only to read weather signs, the immediate economic indicators of their day, but also to read the signs of the times. He draws our attention to the difference between clock time, *chronos* in the Greek, and an appointed time, *kairos* in the Greek. We use the same word for both in English, so sometimes it's lost on us. His point, though, is if we can read our watch but are clueless about what God is inviting us into at a particular juncture, we have missed the main point. Who cares if we time and measure everything perfectly down to the millisecond if we miss fork-in-the-road, future-altering opportunities God has placed in our path?

How can we develop wisdom so that we can discern the appointed times, the fork-in-the-road opportunities? Generally, we discern best in community, asking questions and taking a holistic approach. On our own any one of us may make short-sighted decisions and leave out important pieces of data or differing perspectives we should take into account which will call for a different course of action.

Discerning in community allows us to evaluate and distinguish between what is urgent and what is important. Sometimes something is both urgent and important. More often though, the things that clamor the loudest for our attention as urgent are ultimately not that important. If we operate on urgency alone, we will miss what is really important and possibly miss the invitations of God that are the most crucial and lifegiving for us and for those in our vicinity.

For a year now I have been inviting discernment in community at St Paul's. You've heard these questions before if you've been here, and you'll keep hearing them. What is God calling us to in this season? How are we invited at this time in this place to live the mission of God's church? It's an old invitation, this mission, and we respond to it with differing answers over time.

The mission of the followers of Jesus in community—the body of Christ—the Church—is consistent. The methods and models we use to carry out the mission change over time and have changed quite drastically about every 500 years. We are in the midst of one of those 500-year transitional periods right now. There is disequilibrium, a kind of turbulence, a lot of noise, and a sense that things are not like they used to be. And it is not entirely clear where things will wind up. We're in an in-between time.

*And*, in the midst of changes, we can rely on some bedrock, trustworthy things. Here are three of them: 1) the love of God; 2) the slow and steady work of God in us and through us and sometimes in spite us and often when we know nothing about it; and 3) the consistency of the reconciling mission given to us by Jesus. What is that mission? *To restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ*. Check it out on page 855 of the Book of Common Prayer.

It's an awesome mission. It is not on us to complete the mission on our own, not us as individuals, not us as St Paul's. But it is on us, as individuals and as St Paul's collectively, to discern how we are called to further the mission, to be part of the mission at this time in this place, and this place means Key West and the Lower Keys, not just inside this beautiful and holy filling station. It is on us to identify our part and our partners and to labor with love and joy on and in and for this mission given us by Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.

Some of you have been identifying particular callings for you in this time and in this place. New expressions of the mission have begun around here and are in stages of beginning. We are moving in new ministry directions, perhaps more slowly than some of us would like, but we are moving on living the mission in service to God and others. I'll name one right quick.

On Tuesday, for the third month in a row at Poinciana Gardens, Clare Keller and Bj. Thompson will take the ministry of healing prayer and holy communion to the residents of Poinciana Gardens. 1:30 PM, third Tuesdays. There are a number of St Paul's-connected people at Poinciana Gardens. Some of them are able to attend services at St Paul's, and many are not. But it's not just for them, it's for anybody in that place who would like to receive the ministry of healing prayer and receive the sacrament. All are welcome. This is the mission: go where the people are, and be about the business of restoring unity.

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At the beginning of today's gospel passage, Jesus speaks of fire and division.

He says he has come to bring fire upon the earth and to undergo a baptism, perhaps a baptism by fire. And he says he has come to bring not peace but division.

Fire and division.

The communities of Jewish Jesus followers dispersed around the Mediterranean region to whom Luke's gospel is first addressed would not have understood this

passage as predicting some future reality. Rather, for them, this passage about divided families describes their current circumstance.

Following Jesus as the Messiah has already involved them in a fiery movement and perhaps a baptism by fire.

And following Jesus has already divided them from their families, both their families of origin and from their wider Jewish family, the Jewish people as a whole. By the time of Luke's writing in about the year 85, Jewish Jesus followers, not considered any longer to be proper Jews, have been kicked out of synagogues and other locations and centers of Jewish life, religion, and culture as Judaism as a whole is undergoing some big changes after the destruction of the temple.

So, for these first recipients of Luke's gospel, straight talk about familial divisions on account of Jesus might have been not a threat but a kind of consolation. *Yes, that's right. We have been divided from our families because of our differing views about Jesus. Somehow this is part of what we should expect.*

As many of us may experience up close and personal in our own extended families and communities, disagreements about things we hold to be important often cause divisions even now.

But right here and right now, for us seeking to follow Jesus in Key West and the Lower Keys, what else could fire and division be?

Could we claim again in this season after the Day of Pentecost, this tenth Sunday after Pentecost, the fire of the Holy Spirit that came in power upon the Church that day? The fire of the Spirit who is our advocate and guide whom Jesus said would lead us into all truth. Let's lay claim to that fire.

And could we understand division not as the results of divisiveness but as a strategy for doing our work together? Dispersed in squads and teams and groups activated for this mission? As in division of labor among and between persons of varying gifts and interests. Let's deploy that kind of division for good.

And as we seek to interpret the signs of the times in which we live where we are, what is fire is that Spirit kindling in you? What is your part, and who are your partners?

The bleacher people are rooting for us. We are their resilient descendants. Folks in this community are increasingly willing to tell us how we can partner with them in

new ways of loving service. Loving service that we undertake not because we are trying to earn the approval of God or the great cloud of witnesses or anybody else. But rather loving service we take up in response to the amazing grace made manifest toward us.

It all comes down to this, really: God loves the world and through us makes that love known. *Restoring all people to unity with God and each other in Christ.* That's the mission. Let's go live it.