

# Sermon

August 14, 2016 | The 13th Sunday after Pentecost  
Text: Luke 12:49-56 | Preacher: Dan Puchalla

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Here's something that keeps me up at night: I worry that I am too much like Rudy Giuliani.

This past week, Donald Trump said, "Hillary wants to abolish – essentially abolish the Second Amendment. By the way, and if she gets to pick her judges, nothing you can do, folks. Although the Second Amendment people – maybe there is, I don't know. But I tell you what, that'll be a horrible day."

Trump's meaning seemed clear: if Clinton is elected, the only recourse for so-called Second Amendment people is to shoot her or her appointees or both. Paul Ryan gave the best defense of Trump, saying it sounded to him like a joke gone bad. But Rudy Giuliani gave a thoroughly different interpretation. What Trump meant, Giuliani explained, is that Second Amendment people can do something about it by *voting* against her, not killing her. He simply couldn't have meant that, Giuliani explained, because that would be crazy. (*New York Times*, August 9, 2016, <http://goo.gl/qdtw93>)

As a preacher, I worry about being the Rudy Giuliani for Jesus and the Bible generally. Sometimes, the Bible and throws us a Donald Trump moment. Sometimes it says something so crazy-sounding or so evil-sounding that we don't know what to do with it.

Jesus throws us a Trump moment today in this passage from Luke. Jesus says, "I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! ... Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division! From now on five in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three; 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." What is Jesus talking about? I thought we were following him to knit back together a human family divided and broken by hatred and conflict, and here he is saying that that is precisely what he has come to bring. What are we to do with these words?

It's tempting to follow the Giuliani hermeneutic, to defend Jesus at all costs by radically interpreting his words to mean

something other than what he seems to mean,, to make what sounds evil into something that is acceptable and reassuring.

Today we're launching our new small group series for the fall, which, like the past two years, will be about reading the Bible together, this time the Gospel of Luke. This will be our third small group series about reading the Bible, and so far I think everyone who has participated in them has had a Trump moment or two – a moment when we have encountered something in the text that is so crazy-sounding or so evil-sounding that we don't know what to do with it.

So on this day when we launch a new small group series and in preparation for going once more unto the breach, dear friends, I thought I would offer today a few practical pointers for what to do with Trump moments in the Bible while avoiding the Giuliani hermeneutic. I've even come up with a clever acronym: CHIA.

C stands for *clues*. When you read something in the Bible that seems crazy, evil, or even just very confusing, there might be clues in the text. Reread and reread the text to look for these clues, for some little details and words that might clarify what the text is talking about. So, for instance, in today's gospel, we might notice the clue that Jesus opposes the word "peace" not to the word "violence" but to the word "division." In opposing "peace" to "division," Jesus might be letting us in on what he means when he says he hasn't come to bring peace, namely, he doesn't come to bring unanimity, the kind of peace you get when everyone thinks the same thing and never differ from one another. Another clue we might notice – a not so small one – is how much Jesus talks about the family.

H stands for *history*. L.P. Hartley once wrote that the past is a foreign country (*The Go-Between*, 1953). Reading the Bible is always time travel and, just like when we travel abroad, when we read the Bible we are guests in a land that is not our own, separated by time and language and culture and space. Whenever we encounter a text that seems crazy or evil or confusing, we have to keep in mind the possibility that something is being lost in translation, both figuratively and literally. The good work of scholars to illuminate biblical texts with historical information is essential, and that is the reason

we always include a Sunday morning lecture component to these small group series. In today's gospel, for example, we ought to keep in mind that families were very different in the first-century Greco-roman world from what we understand families to be today. For one thing, we know that nearly every aspect of life, if you were a freeperson, was determined by kinship ties, especially when it came to economics. What you would be in life was more or less fixed by whose child you were. But, as we see throughout the gospels, Jesus and his earliest followers eschewed such familial constrictions in favor of serving God's kingdom. It may be, then, that this passage simply reflects this early rivalry between the biological family and the family of choice that was the church.

I stands for, well, *I*, the first-person pronoun, or it can stand for *internal*. This is the step in which we ask questions about ourselves when we encounter a Trump text. We can ask questions like: What specifically do I find troubling about this text? What emotions does this text stimulate for me? Where might those be coming from? Does this text remind me of something going on in my own life or going on in the world around me? Is this text calling into question something I highly value? Is this text challenging me to rethink the way I think about something?

Perhaps if we find today's gospel troubling, it is because our country feels so deeply and hopelessly divided right now. In fact, if Trump's bad joke illumines anything in us it is our growing fear that our political divisions are on the cusp of erupting into armed conflict. And so I wonder if this text challenges us to think differently about the conflicts or our own times. In the face of our fears, we might think the solution is to strive for something like unity or what politicians too quickly call "healing." But if even Jesus didn't seek such healing, such peace, perhaps we shouldn't either. Instead, perhaps what we need are better ways of dealing with conflict, rather than attempts to eliminate them. Just perhaps.

As I said, I stands for I or internal, but it also stands for *important* because though it is not sufficient unto itself, this is the most important step. I don't believe the Bible is a magic book. I don't think we read it primarily for its own sake but because the work of reading and interpreting it is transformative for us. And so the most important step in reading any text – but particularly in reading Trump texts – is to ask questions about how we are experiencing and are changed

by the text. Jesus lives not in these word but in us who read them.

That brings us finally to A for *acceptance*. Even after going through these steps, there's always the real possibility that what sounds crazy or evil or confusing will simply remain crazy or evil or confusing. Acceptance is the thing that really keeps us from the Giuliani hermeneutic. Acceptance means accepting our own limitations in understanding these texts and it means accepting the limitations of the texts themselves. Perhaps the Trump text will make sense when we read it again in a few years, perhaps it never will. Perhaps there are Trump texts in the Bible that we need to openly denounce and apologize for. Acceptance is about accepting that the Bible is not God and that it is holy only inasmuch as it supports us in growing our relationship with our Creator and her creatures. Acceptance is an act of prayer, in which we ask God to help our understanding, our patience, and our discernment.

Let me conclude by inviting, imploring, and encouraging you to sign up for a small group to read the whole Gospel of Luke together this fall. Now this really screws up my clever acronym, but we should really spell CHIA with two Cs, because the other C stands for *community*. The best way to read the Bible is together, all of us whether we are ardent believers or militant skeptics or anywhere in between. The richness of the Bible – and for that matter, life itself – is truly uncovered not by one guy talking from a podium but in hearing from each other the clues we notice, the history we know, and the questions and transformations effected within each of us.