

How to Sustain Good Trouble

August 17, 2025 at First Church in Cambridge, Congregational, UCC

Rev. Dr. J. Michael Solberg

Texts: Luke 12: 49-56

Needless to say, this is a difficult passage for me to read, and for us to hear. It is difficult, in part, because I doubt you were expecting this. Here we are on a nice, low key, casual summer Sunday. I doubt you came here today looking to add a little more turmoil and division to your day. This was going just fine. We were singing and wishing each other the peace of Christ – and then Jesus comes along and (explosion).

To be clear, this is today's lectionary reading. I didn't just choose to trouble your day. Yes, it's all a bit artificial and even voluntary – but the wider ecumenical church says we are supposed to listen to this passage today – listen to it, even though the effect is something like a Baby Ruth bar floating in a swimming pool, if you know what I mean.

Honestly, though, if we were better trained in scripture, the passage might not be so disturbing, and it certainly wouldn't be surprising. Jesus is mostly just speaking from the tradition of the true prophets of Israel, who repeatedly called out the false prophets as they whitewashed the status quo.

Speaking of those false prophets, Ezekiel gives the word of God: "In truth, they have misled my people, saying, "Peace," when there is no peace, and when the people build a flimsy wall, these prophets smear whitewash on it....Thus I will spend my wrath upon the wall and upon those who have smeared it with whitewash, and I will say to you, "The wall is no more, nor those who smeared it— the prophets of Israel who prophesied concerning Jerusalem and saw visions of peace for it when there was no peace, says the Lord God."

And in the prophet Jeremiah, God says:

For from the least to the greatest of them,
everyone is greedy for unjust gain;
and from prophet to priest,
everyone deals falsely.
They have treated the wound of my people carelessly,
saying, "Peace, peace," when there is no peace.

The books of Proverbs and Hebrews and Revelation all say pretty much the same thing. Jesus himself flips the tables of the money changers in the Temple, and he when knows his enemies are watching him, looking for a chance to undermine him, that's the moment he chooses to break the sabbath, intentionally stirring up controversy. Stirring up good trouble was part of the tradition.

Peace is one of the central messages of the Bible: The prophet Isaiah exclaimed: "Those of steadfast mind you keep in peace - in peace because they trust in you" (26:3). You probably heard many times the words of the angelic host singing at the birth of Jesus: "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those whom God favors!" And Jesus himself, the night before his death, comforted his disciples

by saying, "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you...Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid." But that peace was always the end of a process – not the beginning. That peace always insisted on the truth, on righteousness, on being the peace that comes from the well-being of all, not the ability of some to oppress the well-being of others.

So today's passage about division, even families divided up, might seem off brand for Jesus, but it's not really so. This is, after all, a guy who made his opposition to the powers that be clear enough that they nailed him to a cross. John Lewis, after all, he of "good trouble" fame, was a Baptist minister who learned his ways at the feet of Jesus.

And First Church has a history of stoking division in the name of Jesus. At least for a time now, the church has been about the work of good trouble. In 1991, First Church became just the eleventh UCC church in the country to become open to and affirming of gay and lesbian people. It was that kind of social witness that changed the tide of sentiment around LGBTQ people in our country. So much so that such good trouble hardly seems like trouble anymore. That tide may be ebbing these days, and our affirmation of all may seem more like good trouble again, but such witness will continue to make a difference.

First Church has been a Just Peace church since 1983, declaring that non-violent work for justice is the only sane political option in the world today. The tide has not turned on that one yet, as people across the political spectrum continue to fight violence with violence – as if darkness could be overcome with darkness. But our faithful witness will continue to make a difference.

First Church has been working on the broad issue of racism for a long time – and quite intentionally since at least 2008. We have a commitment to being an antiracist church, and we are living into what that means for our life going forward, including transforming our minds to see reparations as simply a debt to be repaid, not some act of generosity on our part. There's a long way to go for all of us, but the trouble stirred in all our hearts around this is good.

And we are stirring a little good trouble even today with our banner out front, saying that God wants us all to love the immigrants in our midst. God is for love? Shocking, I know.

Indeed I would say that if you feel at home among First Church then you probably feel okay with Jesus flinging a little fire on the earth, causing some division, rocking the boat of a complacent peace. We'd prefer our families not be divided, but you know, if the cause is clear enough, we might even accept that as being necessary.

Of course, I have played to our strengths in all this. I don't know if we are on the right side of history, but we are on the right side of the gospel in all this, so it's good and right to honor that. For me, though, the question for this congregation is how to ground all this, not in progressive politics, but in the faithfulness to the gospel. And how do you do that over the long term? How do you sustain a congregation that cannot just cause some good trouble, but fling some fire, fling some specifically Jesus fire, for years to come? This is where I think we are perhaps not ready to accept the division Jesus says will result from his message. We don't mind being with the progressive crowd, but we can still be uncomfortable with, how shall I put this? Feeling different because of Jesus? Feeling like we don't belong, in a good way, because of Jesus?

Here's what I am thinking about: I had a good, long, open and deep conversation a couple of months ago with Rabbi Claudia Kreiman of Temple Beth Zion, down in Brookline. In the midst of this conversation, we talked about many ways in which the ministry of a rabbi and a pastor are similar in the world today, and it became clear that there are other ways in which – not because of the content of our faiths, but because of the different relationship of our faiths to American society – our ministries are very different.

Specifically, one of the things I asked her about was how they bring new people into the synagogue. It was a fascinating conversation, and the rabbi outlined for me the process that they go through. If someone is Jewish, but has been away from the faith for a number of years, or has never really done anything other than celebrate Hanukkah, and if someone is converting to the faith for the first time, perhaps as the result of marriage, or as the result of a spiritual journey, people wanting to be closer to the Divine, and finding that the Jewish faith and that synagogue to be a beautiful place for that journey.

The rabbi said that in order to bring someone into Judaism today, they have a year-long process before someone can become a member of the synagogue. She said they begin by studying Torah today, that they learn more about Jewish traditions that they will be encouraged, or even expected, to observe so that they can be part of the greater Jewish faith, story, and identity – including what it might mean to keep the Sabbath holy. She said they talk about the things in these new people's lives that they will need to leave behind: perhaps a particular kind of celebration of Christmas, a way of thinking about the dominant ("Christian") culture, and perhaps some ways of eating. And it was fascinating to me to hear her describe this process, because the assumption built into the process was that the person was coming away from something, into something new, something unique, something beautiful.

And that got me thinking about how we do this process, bringing new people into our community. What I realized is that we don't even think of this as "conversion," because we still, even with all the signs to the contrary, think of Christianity as the default faith of people in our society. We still, in the habits of our hearts and minds, think of this as a Christian culture.

Now, I do this with a little trepidation today, especially because I see many new folks sitting in the pews, who could possibly be impacted by this suggestion in the future, but I think I'll go ahead and cause a little good trouble today. I offer it simply as something to think about, to see if it resonates with your sense of our faith and our community today.

What I wonder is if it would not be more appropriate for those of us in the Christian church, even this church, to require a similar form of "conversion" for people coming into the life of First Church, which is so often also coming into honest Christian faith for the first time – or at least the first time in a long time. What if we asked people to learn more about our sacred scripture – really digging in to learn that story, and have it really begin to shape their lives as they come into our midst? What if we talked with people, deeply and personally, about what it would mean to leave certain things behind, as they come into a family of Christian faith? Perhaps leaving behind a certain complacent acceptance of the economic life they lead – listening to Jesus' message, whatever it means today, to sell all you have and give to the poor, and "follow me"? What if we asked them to leave behind a lingering belief in the myth of redemptive violence that so shapes not just our culture, but also shapes Christianity within our culture? What if we asked them to be in worship, and learn our songs, and say our prayers, including the Lord's Prayer, so they could pray it not just by rote, but with conviction: thy kingdom come, thy will be done?

And what if it took a year to do that? What if it took a year, as it does in the synagogue, to bring people in to our way of life and faith? Does the idea make you a little uncomfortable? Does it make you think, “Yeah, no. We can’t do that. No one would bother to go through it. We’d never have another new member ever again!”

I don’t think that’s true. And the example of the synagogue shows me that that’s not true (indeed TBZ has been growing like crazy in the last several years!). But wouldn’t it help clarify the way that we are different – I might even say “divided” to use the language of Jesus – from the world around us?

The only way that we can continue to create good trouble in the world, specifically flinging fire from Jesus kind of trouble, is if new people, and here’s the kicker, all of us, are shaped by the gospel, so that we know what kind of fire to fling – a fire that is based in love for all, the love to which God calls us. That will make us different, that’s gonna disturb some peace, that’s gonna fling some fire, and that’s okay, because it’s good trouble.

In the name of the Living God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, One God, Mother of us all. Amen.

