

Sermon for the Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 15, Year C
19.viii.2007, 10:00 a.m., ELW Service of the Word
Jeremiah 23:23-29; Psalm 82; Hebrews 11:29-12:2; Luke 12:49-56
Evangelical Lutheran Church of Saint James the Apostle / Brogue, Pennsylvania

J. J. !

Grace to you and peace from Him Who is and Who was
and Who is to come. ✍ Amen.

**"I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were
already kindled!"**

Luke 12:49

With today's Gospel still ringing and perhaps stinging
in our ears, now hear this notice from the Associated
Press, dateline Cairo, Egypt, printed in the *International
Herald Tribune* last week:

An Egyptian Muslim who converted to Christianity and then sought official recognition for the change said he had gone into hiding following death threats. The man, Mohammed Hegazy, who sparked controversy when pictures of him posing with a poster of the Virgin Mary were published in newspapers, was shunned by his family and threatened by an Islamist cleric vowing to seek his killing as an apostate. "I know there are fatwas to shed my blood, but I will not give up and I will not leave the country," the 25-year-old Hegazy said in an interview from his hideout. Hegazy caused the dispute when he took the unusual step of going to court to change his religion on his national identity card. He said he wanted to change the religion on his card to set a precedent for others and to ensure that his child can be raised openly as a Christian.

Twenty-five years old and a father, or at least a young man who looks forward to fatherhood someday, a young man with almost a whole life ahead of him, a young man who loves his country, its ancient land and culture, its long-suffering people, too much to leave, as so many thousands of Egyptian Christians have done, Mohammed Hegazy is one Christian who would, it seems to me, understand today's Gospel without explanation or further comment.

Perhaps you do to. For me, though, it always comes as an unwelcome surprise to be reminded that, though Our LORD may not ask great things of us, the risk of our very lives, for example, a risk our Egyptian brother has taken publicly and with determination, something things *are* required of me as a consequence of faith in God's love and salvation in Jesus Christ.

For the most part, I tend to think of what I require of God, an end to suffering and injustice in the world, an end, or at least an answer, to senseless death and the question about God's own mercy and goodness it raises. But, in the words of the Psalmist we prayed today, the LORD throws all these implied accusations back in our teeth, at least in mine:

“How long will *you* judge unjustly and show partiality to the wicked? *Give justice* to the weak and the orphan; *maintain the right* of the lowly and the destitute. *Rescue* the weak and the needy; *deliver* them from the hand of the wicked.”

--Psalm 82:2-4

Refusing to walk on tiptoes around the powerful and vengeful and to let their wrongs slide out of cowardice, but instead speaking the truth to power, regardless of who that is, actually doing something about the rights of those who are accorded no rights by the world, and acting proactively to *rescue* those victimized by others, not simply to offer them my empathy or a

helping hand after the fact, doing all that would be enough to upset many an apple-cart, to kindle the fire of Christ's passion for justice in my little corner of the world, and perhaps in yours.

Our Lutheran Church takes Our LORD's passion for justice seriously enough to call men and women specifically to the work of advocacy ministry, that is to the ministry of advocating the cause of the weak powerless in corridors of power. Some might dismiss this as 'lobbying,' but, for Pastor Neil Harrison, it is one of his principal reasons for getting up in the morning. Pastor Harrison is the newly called Director of Lutheran Advocacy Ministry at the capital in Harrisburg. In a few weeks, just as soon as our dear brother and teacher in the Red Lion schools, Paul Kuhn, gets organized for another school year, Paul and Neil will be riding around together as Paul visits children whose success in their schoolwork is at risk because of the rural poverty in which they are forced to live. Pastor

Harrison will take the impressions he gains on those visits back with him to Harrisburg, to lawmakers who are responsible to and for the people of our Commonwealth, *all* the people, including those children and their struggling families.

Unlike our brother in the faith in far-away Cairo, Egypt, Mohammed Hegazy, you and I will have to go looking for that ‘fire on the earth’ for which Our LORD prayed so fervently.

Neither you nor I, as long as we live in this country or anywhere in what was Christendom, will ever be threatened, shunned, hunted down or killed simply for professing our faith in the Triune God, or for posing for a photograph next to icons of Mary, the Blessed Mother of God, such as those at the West Altar left over from our August 15th liturgy and celebration.

But, some people might not like it were we to actually *do* what the Psalm says, which we are fully capable of doing in and through this democracy of ours, so prepare yourself. What do

you think would happen were we to publicly welcome, rescue and defend those with no welcome in our society, widows and orphans, the single mothers and their kids, and all those poor in things but richer than anyone knows in spirit, the freaks and misfits and outcasts of our community, whoever they, or *we*, may be. What do you think would happen were we to *open these doors* with a cheerful welcome after the school doors shut, so that the children of working mothers have a safe and clean and quiet place to do their homework and play a little, before they return to a rented trailer in a hollow where the joy shines even less than the sun? What would people say were we, as a congregation, to demand justice in the workplaces of our nation and, as citizens individually, to *vote* on behalf of *workers* who give their sweat and toil and who receive back as little as the market will bear, with no health care insured and nothing to look forward to but unemployment if they cause trouble? What

would we be getting ourselves into were we to work with other churches through our York County Council of Churches to *protect and rescue* the children and women, but also men, *beaten and shouted* into silence through domestic violence? *Add them* to the church sign out front and on the roads leading to this church as those who are *specifically* welcomed; start and establish a support group for them, *here*, out in the country, where abuse happens aplenty, but know that they will chatter in the parking lot and down at the Brogue Store and in the Lion's Pride and the Cape Horn Family Restaurant, at the beauty shop and the barber shop and the speakeasy no one is supposed to know about, and maybe even in the County Courthouse and the State House, for that matter. But, oh, wouldn't the fire be glorious! 🙏Amen.

Now to Him Who loves us and has freed us from our sins by His blood and has made of us a Kingdom, priests to His God and Father, to Him be glory and dominion with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. ✍ Amen.

