

MOVING TARGET
Sermon for Pentecost 13C—Lk 12:49-56
LPC, 8/18/13

I do Zumba fitness. In case you don't know what Zumba is, it's an exercise program based on Latin dancing. I like it because it feels more like having fun than working. Zumba instructors have some kind of uniform training, but I've worked with about a dozen different instructors and they're all different.

I attended a class with a new instructor last Wednesday and oh, my goodness, was she ever a challenge. I only knew one of the routines she used, and her energy was absolutely boundless. I'm used to breaks between songs that allow me to towel off and get a drink, but she went from one frenetic dance to the next with hardly a pause, smiling non-stop. I was spent fifty minutes into the class. But I had to admit, I'd come to the class to do Zumba. I had to expect to move.

You've all come to church this morning. You're probably not expecting to do Zumba, and in that expectation you are correct. But you may not be expecting to move at all, and that may not be correct. If you want to follow Jesus, you have to expect to move. In some way.

At least that's Jesus appears to be saying in this very difficult teaching from Luke about bringing fire to the earth instead of peace. This is not what we expect Jesus to say. We expect Jesus to talk about peace. We expect Jesus to bring a baptism of affirmation not division. And Jesus very explicitly says he is bringing fire and division.

It's upsetting to think of family members divided against one another. Keep in mind that when Jesus mentions mother-in-law vs. daughter-in-law he is addressing a culture where mother-in-law and daughter-in-law lived under the same roof. The point is that Jesus potentially brings conflict into the household, one of the most basic units of human existence. This is conflict of the most intimate sort.

Does this mean that following Jesus destroys any hope of family harmony? No! Does this mean that if your family is peaceful you can't be following Jesus? Of course not. It means that following Jesus may bring you into conflict with that which you hold most dear, and what you most want to stay the same forever.

Now Jesus speaks in other places about how following God brings a person into conflict when what he or she holds most dear is material goods, or money, but here I think he's challenging something besides attachment to property. I think he's challenging attachment to ideas, assumptions, even culture. These are our most intimate attachments, as intimate as family, and we may not even know we have them.

A minor example: I was always encouraged, in my academic career, to speak up and let my opinions be known. I assumed that my opinions should always be voiced.

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Until one day a co-worker told me, rather gently under the circumstances, I have to admit, “You know, you’re awfully opinionated.”

Another example: a mother takes her responsibility for her child’s health very seriously. When her daughter shows signs of anorexia, the mother throws herself into the task of getting her daughter to eat. The situation gets worse and worse and the mother becomes more obsessed with her daughter’s diet. It takes a psychiatrist to point out that the mother is making things worse for her child.

This happens in religious practice too – people assume they must be faithful in a certain way. That way works for awhile, but then it doesn’t. People who want to follow Jesus have to be prepared to move. Jesus himself was always on the move.

As a matter of fact, the Bible is full of stories of God making people move around: Abraham, Moses and the Children of Israel, the Apostle Paul. If you want to follow God, you have to expect to move.

Yes, God is eternal. But God is not unmoving. God is always on the move. The reason God is always on the move is because the earth isn’t the way God wants it yet. Our own senses tell us this is true. If we want to follow Jesus, since Jesus is always on the move, we have to expect to move.

All right, but what about the tradition in our faith that seems to contradict this? What about that “Be still and know that I am God” stuff?

It still applies. Expecting movement makes the need for constant prayer even more pressing. You know how football players do this kind of drill [*demonstrate*] to be ready to respond to the movements of their opponents on the scrimmage line? Prayer, although it usually involves quieting all body movement, serves the same kind of function for Christians. Prayer is a sort of drill that enables a person to respond to the movements of God.

This is why those breaks for toweling off and getting a drink of water are so important, if not in Zumba, at least in the Christian life. They give us a chance to ask, “What now, God?”

And God may well be asking for a temporary cessation of movement. Following Jesus may well involve being static for awhile. Following Jesus may involve doing the same thing day after day, or year after year. Until it doesn’t.

We can usually identify these times when what has worked before no longer does. Something feels out of kilter. The solution is not to try to recreate the conditions under which things once worked. We can’t. Neither can we expect never to move. Nor have we a right to be outraged when Jesus is a moving target. That’s what Jesus does.

God moves. Expect movement. But pray always.