

Luke 12:49-56
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“Jesus the Divider?”

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A preaching professor once told us, “begin your sermon preparation by looking for the tension in the biblical story.” Well we don’t have to read far to find major tension in today’s story.

Jesus, who we know as the Prince of Peace, the Commander of compassion, the Judicial Vicar of Justice, the Life Coach of love, tells us he came to bring division, and fire, and other awful sounding things. This sounds like the opposite of everything we know about him... What could our savior be trying to say?

As we begin to unpack this story, we need to be gentle. The strong language sounds eerily familiar to bible thumping, pulpit banging, fire and brimstone preachers who condemn entire groups of people with harsh, unloving judgement... and end up driving many away from church, and from God. We need caution as these words could uncover wounds experienced by particular groups of people sitting next to us this morning. But I am convinced this is NOT Jesus intention.

Today, Jesus throws a major-league curve ball, he blindsides our expectations in grand fashion. He says, “I have not come to bring peace, but division.” He continues describing how he will pit family member against family member, generation against generation.

Unpacking these stunning words begins with an admission that church people have fallen in love with a particular image of Jesus; Jesus the shepherd who cares so much he searches for a single lost sheep, the healer who heals both friend and foe, the one who hugs untouchables, loves the unloved... this is one side of Jesus, captured in hymns lyrics like,

“Have we trials and temptations? Is there trouble anywhere? We should never be discouraged – take it to the lord in prayer. Can we find a friend so faithful, who will all our sorrows share, Jesus knows our every weakness... take it to the lord in prayer.”

As we begin to understand why today’s story confuses us, we need to admit much of the Church has fallen in love with a particular, comfortable image of Jesus; but this is only a part of Christ’s story.

Then there is the side of Jesus that has always bewildered us. we find an entry point in this story. Jesus’ prophetic work is going to divide people, even families. Has Jesus ever caused trouble in your family? Is religion a taboo topic at the holiday dinner table, or on facebook? We might ask, is Jesus saying that his purpose on earth is to bring fire and division? I don’t think that is the point either.

Yet Jesus was born to incarnate a specific unification plan called the Kingdom of God, and he recognizes not everyone will welcome the plan.

This morning we are invited to understand the God which sometimes confuses and even discomforts us. Remember the divisions and upheaval caused during Holy week. Remember Jonah, sent by God to sinful Nineveh, but the entire city repents and God withholds punishment. This angers Jonah causing him to question everything he thought to be true about God, because he knew how much they deserved a whipping. God's peace plan includes a parable where the workers cry "unfair" as God's kingdom is compared to a landowner who pays a full day wage to those who only worked one hour, and nothing extra to those who worked all day. Jesus challenged entrenched powers, he offered grace to those we deem undeserving, he sometimes told stories that stripped his own followers of their privilege within society.

In a violent world, we are taught to fight back, defend ourself, Jesus' non-violent peace plan tells us to turn the other cheek, go the extra mile. We struggle to hear the poor will be blessed, and the mournful will receive great joy. We can become offended at God's Generous grace. Undeserved forgiveness. And the call to Love our enemy. We like to think of these as utopian goals when actually these are the day to day practices of Christ's followers as we seek to embody the values of God's kingdom. I often hear these called, "The Reversals of God's Kingdom."

John Barker writes for American Catholic, "the Gospel of Luke assures us the Kingdom of God, in its fullness, will confound all our expectations and overturn our experiences. In the Kingdom of God everything will be turned upside down. Luke assures us time and again that in God's realm those who struggle in life now—those who are at the bottom or on the edges of human society—will suddenly find themselves at the top and in the center."

Mr. Barker pushes the envelope further adding Jesus' words, "Behold, some are last who will be first, and some are first who will be last."

And here is where Luke's story comes full circle. The opening of this sermon sounded a caution to handle this story gently. These reversals of God's kingdom are why. Jesus isn't coming to divide us. He has done substantial social and spiritual analysis and he sees how God's peace plan will offend and even cause controversy.

There is no denying part of Jesus' ministry was to comfort and heal, to love and show compassion, to friend and support everyone. But today Luke reminds us drawing our circles of concern, love and mission too narrowly is sinful. If we just worry about our own, we are not fully embodying the gospel. The full picture of discipleship embraces God's challenging peace plan and its call to establish relationships of mercy, compassion, and justice with people from all parts of life, and with all of creation.

A professor and friend of mine in Seminary had a wonderful way of simplifying this difficult message, he said, "Jesus came to comfort the challenged and challenge the comfortable, and that is our calling too."

Perhaps some of us get a case of whiplash as we listen to Jesus' words today. But I think if we are honest, we have known this all along: Our commitment to follow Jesus will affect every other decision, commitment, and relationship in our life. It will affect our values and our circles of love. And in a most strange twist of the plot, this IS God's gift of Grace to all of us.

Amen