

FAMILY DISCORD

Luke 12:49-56

In 1977 I moved back to Rhode Island to live with my mom and younger sisters. I am 7 and 12 years older than my younger sisters. At that time, the youngest, Francoise, was still in elementary school, and Stephanie was taking a ‘gap’ year before starting college. One evening the three of us sat cross legged on the floor of the “elevator” room a cassette tape recorder in the center of our circle. What is an “elevator” room, you ask? When Mom returned home after a year in rehab a fulltime wheelchair user, Papa found an antique elevator, and had it installed. Hence the name of the room!!

Anyway, on this day the three of us were gathered around this cassette player trying to record a ‘letter’ to our brother George and his family in Colorado. They had sent us the recorder for Christmas hoping to hear from us more often. So, there we were trying to come up with conversation. It was awkward trying to come up with something to talk about as we stared at this rectangular box. Normally never lacking for conversation we were suddenly struck dumb. Being the oldest, I ventured forth: “Yeah, Stephie just got a new haircut – a Dorothy Hammill cut. I think it is cute, but she is a little defensive about it.” “I am not!” Steph shot back. Dead silence. We looked at one another, stopped the recording, and each went our separate ways. That was the last time we ever tried that!

Family discord. Jesus says this morning in our text, “Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, I have come instead to bring division. From now on, a household of five will be divided – three against two and two against three...” And you and I are left scratching our heads wondering what happened to the Prince of Peace, the babe in the manger, the kindly carpenter who healed the man possessed by many demons in Luke 8, or stopped by for supper at the home of Mary and Martha in Luke 10? We are not comfortable with this type of language coming from Jesus. It is very unsettling. Just the same, it is part of the Bible, so you and I need to deal with it and make some sense of it.

It might help if we first look at other “divisive” sayings of Jesus in Scripture: Division is a troubling word, and as it happens, divisive talk and actions from Jesus or about Jesus keep cropping up in the gospels. Consider:

- When John the Baptist was announcing Jesus’ coming, he said, “His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.” (Luke 3:17)

- In the early days of Jesus’ ministry, when he visited the Nazareth synagogue with his reputation as a preacher and healer preceding him, the congregation initially “spoke well of him.” (Luke 4:22) But Jesus wasn’t content to leave it at that, and intentionally provoked them with his “hometown” comments to the point that they wanted to dispatch him over a cliff. (Luke 4:16-30)

- When Jesus spoke to a crowd at the festival of booths in Jerusalem about rivers of living water, some hearers decided he was the Messiah. Others doubted it, however, and the gospel narrator says, “So there was a division in the crowd because of him.” (John 7:43)
- When a would-be follower told Jesus he first wanted to bury his father, the sense of Jesus’ response was that the man should leave his family obligations behind, which, if the man had done so, would have effectively divided him from his family. (Luke 9:57-60)
- In elaborating on his “I have come to bring ... division” comments in today’s reading, Jesus talked about setting father against son, mother against daughter, mother-in-law against daughter-in-law and vice versa in all three cases.
- And let’s not forget that in the Gospel of Matthew parallel to today’s reading, Jesus says, “I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.” (Matthew 10:34)

Is this the sort of Jesus we want? Lord knows we already have enough things that divide us – politics, nationalism, ethnicity, economic status, social standing, educational level, religion, denominations, cultural issues (such as gun control, abortion, immigration, same-sex marriage, etc.) and more – without also having a divisive Savior. (Homiletics Online, 2013)

Episcopalian Theologian, Barbara Brown Taylor, makes an interesting parallel between the type of family “values” Jesus seems to be proposing and the kind the world seeks. “What are we to make of such a harsh pronouncement, and where, please, is the good news in it? Let Jesus divide us from our enemies, by all means – from those who hit and hurt, lie and steal, from those who corrupt and destroy the creatures of God – but from our own families?? From our own parents and our own children, the very people who have taught us what little we know about the love and forgiveness of God?” (Taylor, Gospel Medicine, page 15).

Some people never learned these things at home – these folks might be able to identify with Jesus’ words this morning. They know that blood relation is no guarantee of love or forgiveness, and that sometimes the only way to save your life is to lose your family, closing the door on them and never looking back. Taylor continues to point out, “But Jesus is not talking about the ordinary divisiveness that can occur in family life, as upsetting as they can be.” No, Jesus is very specifically talking about the divisions that occur between parents and children, brothers and sisters, husband and wives when He walks into their lives. He is talking about what happened to family loyalty when he asks his followers to put God first in their lives. He is talking about what happens to family harmony when he asks them to choose whom they will follow!”

I can relate to this somewhat on a personal level. When I accepted Jesus into my heart as my Lord and Savior at the age of 21, I knew then that I could never again be satisfied with being a Sunday morning Christian. I wanted more. I wanted a deeper and much more intimate relationship with Jesus. I wanted a daily walk with Him. I knew then I could not continue on in the Catholic faith – a faith that excluded non-Catholics from the

table of the Lord. I will never forget that first Sunday when I stopped receiving Holy Communion at Mass. I could no longer be part of a church that did not welcome all at the table of the Lord. And as I stayed in the pew while the rest of my family went forward for Communion, I wept. My heart was breaking for the church I had loved all my life, and for myself. For me, that moment was a divisive moment; and it was divisive for the very reason that I was choosing to follow Jesus and not the man-made “rules” of the church. So, yes, in this way, I can understand these words of Jesus. I was learning that loyalty to God is not one allegiance to be juggled along with all the rest. It is primary. It is not negotiable. It is a matter of life and death.

There are other circumstances in Scripture where Jesus does not model what you and I see as family values. Way back when he was still a baby, old Simeon took him from his mother’s arms and told her what he saw in his eyes. “This child is destined for the falling and rising of many in Israel,” he said to her, “and a sword will pierce your own soul too.” (Luke 2:34-35)

Then when he was twelve years old and had gone with his parents on pilgrimage to Jerusalem, he deliberately stayed behind while then left for home. After three days of frantic searching, they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers. “Why have you treated us like this? they asked him, but he looked at them placidly and said, “Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be at my Father’s house?” (Luke 2:49)

But perhaps the most telling encounter came later, when his mother and his brothers came to see him in one of the towns where he was teaching but could not reach him because of all the people. Thinking he would be pleased, someone elbowed a way through the crowd and told Jesus they were there and that they wanted to see him, but he replied, “My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it!” (Luke 8:21).

Jesus did not despise family, but he did refine it. For him, family was not a matter of whose chromosomes you carry around inside of you, but whose image you are created in. It was not a matter of who has the same last name or lives at the same address; but who serves the same God. Hence, we talk about our Church “family,” the people who come into our lives sharing the life and blood of Jesus. This is the glue that keeps us together.

Where is the good news this morning in these “divisive” words of Jesus? In summary the main point of today’s scripture was directed at his disciples. Jesus’ words about bringing not peace but division were spoken directly to them (Luke 12:1, 22). His purpose seems to be to correct any misconceptions they held about what following him entailed. When he asked them, rhetorically, “Do you think that I have come to bring peace on earth?” he was challenging their assumption that he was going to establish the messianic reign Israel had long looked for, where they would be an independent people again, secure in the borders of a land flowing with milk and honey. That, as we now know, was not where Jesus was headed. He was already feeling the shadow of the cross, and, if the disciples

were going to stay with him, they needed to know that the way ahead would force them to not only shuck off their expectations of messianic peace, but also to make hard choices about who had a claim on them.

Someone once gave me a plaque which stated, “Serving the Lord will not make me rich, but the benefits are out of this world.” In a nutshell, I think Jesus is saying somewhat the same thing to his first followers. What it means for you and me today kind of hinges on the series we just finished. We live in a broken world with finite bodies, and there are days where you wish you had never crawled out of bed. At the same time, there is much to celebrate in our lives – the cry of a newborn baby, the laughter of children, the beauty of every sunrise and sunset, our children and grandchildren, the satisfaction of a job well done, the joy of being able to worship freely each and every Sunday where we choose... I am sure we could go on and on. Thanks be to God. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.