

SCRIPTURE

Luke 12:49–56

Jesus the Cause of Division

49 “I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! 50 I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what stress I am under until it is completed! 51 Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division! 52 From now on five in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three; 53 they will be divided:

father against son
and son against father,
mother against daughter
and daughter against mother,
mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law
and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law.”

54 He also said to the crowds, “When you see a cloud rising in the west, you immediately say, ‘It is going to rain’; and so it happens. 55 And when you see the south wind blowing, you say, ‘There will be scorching heat’; and it happens. 56 You hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present time?”

MESSAGE - Division

It’s summertime. A time of rest, a time of ease. In the cycle of the seasons spring is the time of preparing, planting, of furious growth and expansion. Summer is the season in which we merely wait; the heat of the day precludes hard toil, instead we let nature take its course. Plants continue to grow and mature under God’s direction – everything is out of our hands. We merely maintain while God does his creative and generative work.

Into this peaceful time of abiding and waiting today’s gospel reading comes as a bolt of lightning.

‘I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what stress I am under until it is completed! Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, not peace, but rather division!’

Now I think that many of us like to picture Jesus as soft, welcoming, and inclusive. Jesus doesn’t have harsh words, and if he does they are narrowly directed to those few in positions of power who are abusing their office to exploit others. Certainly Jesus doesn’t speak like this to the general public.

And what is this division that Jesus speaks of? What about one God, one Spirit, one baptism, and one kingdom? What about reconciliation, making us whole?

This passage takes some of us by surprise. We don’t really like it, so the temptation is to disregard it – dismiss it. It’s an aberration, it doesn’t fit with the Jesus we want. It could be that Luke got it wrong, that he’s not reporting things properly. Except that Matthew wrote something quite similar to this, so that makes two witnesses reporting the same thing.

Maybe it was just that Jesus was having a bad day – he was particularly stressed with all the raggedy people who wouldn't leave him alone and so he was being a little snippy with them.

Whatever the reason for this harsh teaching of Jesus, our tendency toward confirmation bias suggests to us that we should simply skip over this particular passage without any further thought. To dwell on it would only give it more significance and just might upset our comfortable little bubble. It would be safest to ignore this and move on, and continue to think of Jesus as fully accepting, fully inclusive, and fully affirming of whatever it is that we set our hearts to.

But that would be a mistake. A good general rule is that when you hear something that disturbs you, it bears further attention. We should stop and reconsider. When we hear something that doesn't fit into our neat little worldview there's a good chance that it's reality knocking on our door.

Reality has this annoying tendency to not conform to our expectations; that's the nature of it – it just exists regardless of what we think. Because of this stubborn attribute of simply being, reality sometimes intrudes – it gets in our way, it shakes us up. As we cruise through life thinking that we have everything sorted, every once in a while reality throws a stumbling block in our path, something that makes us question our assumptions. We ignore those events at our own peril.

And so we pay attention – we rethink. Because after all, if something jars our worldview, is it more likely that our worldview is in wrong, or that reality in itself is wrong?

We better hope that it's us. If reality-as-such is wrong then we have no hope for anything, but if we're wrong we can learn and grow.

All of this to say that when we encounter something that challenges us we can break ourselves apart on it – because wilfully ignoring things that challenge us leads to a bifurcation – we have to compartmentalize those things we reject, store them in a little place that we don't look into, which results in a loss of integrity and wholeness. Or we can take the challenge as an opportunity to rethink and course correct. Course correction allows us to maintain our integrity and a right relationship with reality; I think that's our best option.

In today's challenge, Jesus is quite definitely the stumbling block for us. Elsewhere in the gospels he claims to be just that, and we see him living into that role right now.

Jesus the peacemaker, the reconciler, the healer, speaks of the division that he will cause. It's a pretty apocalyptic message filled with images of division, discord, and violence. And all this conflict is to happen within families which are supposed to be our closest, most reliable relationships. Home is where they have to take you in. But Jesus said that not even these relationships are inviolable; he is going to get in the middle and there is going to be discord.

So what are we to make of this? Does Jesus want to fracture families? I thought it was the thief who comes to kill and destroy, not Jesus.

To answer this we have to turn to something else that Jesus said, found in John's gospel. 'I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.'

This is another of those divisive, provocative statements that many of us would prefer to avoid. It's direct, and it is unequivocally exclusive. It's a stumbling block that refuses to budge.

Especially in this generation, there's a strong ethos of go-along-to-get-along. Many people don't like to hold to firm truth claims, because to do so might suggest that someone else is wrong, and above all, we don't want to offend anyone. That seems to be the capital crime of this decade – causing someone offense by challenging their opinion of the world. Something tells me that the real Jesus would not be too popular on social media if he were online.

There is a strong social pressure, especially online, to accept just about any statement by any person – because if they feel it then it must of course be valid. In this way we maintain a certain peace.

But it's a false peace. This is the peace that Jesus said he came to shatter. The false peace that we create by refusing to challenge each other, the 'informed naivety' of Vermeulen and van den Akker, is an enabling delusion that does none of us any good. We can't maintain peace by assuring everyone we meet that they are always right about everything that they think.

Eventually the truth comes out – all that is hidden will be revealed, all that is in darkness will come into the light. Reality has a way of intruding and asserting itself over and against our wishes, and when that happens our false peace of stroking and affirming each other is revealed as the house of cards that it is.

Jesus says if you want real peace align yourself properly with reality. Reality is not our desire, nor our opinion. Proverbs 18 states that a fool takes no pleasure in understanding, but only in expressing personal opinion. Reality doesn't care what we think. If we wish to be wise – or even if we only wish to be functional – then we need to seek a true understanding of and proper relationship to reality. And that reality is Jesus himself.

I am the way, the truth, and the life. The truth of Jesus does not bend merely because we'd like it to. It simply is. That is the basic nature of God; as my Jamaican friends say 'he is God all on his own.' It doesn't matter what we think or what we affirm – God simply self-exists. How we react to that truth determines how we are divided. This is the division of which Jesus spoke.

Within my own family are divisions over Jesus. My brother and I are similar in many ways – we're both bright, articulate; both of us have questing souls that are searching for truth. But we are deeply divided.

My brother is a strong humanist – essentially he believes that rationality has supplanted the need for the divine. We don't need God; God is merely a human construct that we've outgrown now that we've pushed the boundaries of the unknown back to a comfortable distance. More than this, he views the church as an institution of irrationality whose purpose was and is to control and enslave minds.

The ideal of our tolerant society is that the two of us should be able to coexist, each holding to our own truths, compartmentalizing that upon which we can't agree. However, this is simply not the case. I admit that I have a very difficult time communicating with my brother.

Even on topics that are not related in any way to religion or spirituality we have difficulty. The way it appears to me is that because he views religion with such contempt he is continually looking for hidden motivations or agendas when we speak. The result is that nothing I say can be taken at face value;

every innocuous comment is read and reread through a lens of suspicion such that no actual communication can take place.

It's not that I'm trying to sell him Jesus and he's not buying; it's that we see the world so differently that even though we speak the same tongue there is not enough common vocabulary or experience to bridge the gap.

Neither is it that we are just two brothers who fight, and it just manifests itself in these kind of disagreements. There is no animosity between us that I'm aware of – though we do both get hot under the collar and frustrated at each other's inability to see what seems to each of us to be self-evident truth. Both of us think we are aligning ourselves to reality; in his case reality is the material world, in my case ultimate reality is found in the person of God. We're both sincere - we simply inhabit separate kingdoms.

And so my house is divided because of Jesus. Brother against brother. Not because Jesus decided to be mean or arbitrary, not because he wants to see strife, but simply because he came to earth and declared 'I am the way, the truth, and the life' and my brother and I responded to this differently.

I've noticed that pattern repeating itself in other relationships. Because I came to faith as an adult I underwent some significant changes in my lifestyle.

Peter's epistle addresses this. He wrote 'Have as your intention to live the rest of your life not ruled by human desires but by the will of God. You have already spent enough time doing what the Gentiles do, living in licentiousness, passions, drunkenness, revels, carousing, and lawless idolatry.'

He's basically saying that coming to faith means growing up. No longer being the party animal, living for the moment, but setting our sights higher than immediate gratification. This was certainly true in my case.

What I discovered is that as I grew away from those self-indulgent behaviors I lost friends. Again, as with my brother, it wasn't that there was any animosity or ill will. It was simply that once I stopped the partying I realized that I had nothing else in common with those people. We weren't interesting to each other any more and so we drifted apart.

Be holy as I am holy, God instructed us. What does that mean? To be consecrated – to be set apart. There's that division theme again.

Our faith should not be something that we do on Sundays that has no affect on the rest of our lives. At its root our faith is about relationship and every relationship we have has an effect on us – every interaction we have with each other leaves a mark. Surely if we have a relationship with God: the almighty, the ground of being, the first mover, the ultimate reality, then we should find ourselves changed. Significantly. And that change is going to set us apart from many people. It's going to divide us.

So we should really not be surprised nor challenged by Jesus' statement that following him would be divisive. In fact, that is what we want. We want to be different. We don't want to be dead in our sins, mourning as the rest of the world does – we are to be a light, a beacon of hope. We are to be different,

not to be special or elite or against others, but different to attract others and share in the new life that we have found in Jesus.

Ultimately our division has as its aim reconciliation, but on a new plane, a new level. We are the firstfruits, the pioneers so to speak, who follow and illumine a narrower path that leads to a life in community that the world can't on its own even comprehend, much less attain.

Even a dead fish will float downstream with the others; that's not us - we are called to be live fish. Living with the division brought by holding fast to truth is bound to ruffle some feathers. Sometimes the cost will be high, high enough to tempt us to shrink back and become lesser men or women. It may divide a household two against three or mother against daughter.

But it is in going through this baptism that the Spirit will lead us, and our families, from the lesser peace of avoiding conflict to a true and lasting peace; the peace of being in a right relationship with the way, the truth, and the life.

I speak to you this morning in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.
Amen.