

DIVISION?

Scripture Readings: Genesis 21:8-21; Psalm 86:1-10, 16-17; Romans 6:1b-11; Matthew 10: 24-39

Texts: Romans 6:4; Matthew 10:29-35

The passage from the gospel is too much for one sermon but I imagine that one section attracted most of our attention. One week after Father's Day, we hear Jesus say that he does not come to bring peace but a sword, for I have come to set a man against his father, and whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me. Jesus is basically saying that you cannot really be a Christian unless you love Jesus more than you love your parents. You cannot really be a Christian unless you love Jesus more than you love your children!

Are you uncomfortable yet?

At this juncture, we may be tempted to rationalize the passage. For instance, we know that this passage comes from the Q source—a source that New Testament scholars say is common to Matthew and Luke, not found in the gospels of Mark or John. This exclusion means that it is a source that may not reflect the oldest traditions of stories or sayings about Jesus. Sometimes, even between Matthew and Luke, the sayings are not exact. For instance, in the gospel of Luke, Jesus talks about division rather than a sword. Of course, some other languages use the same word for cut and divide; so, maybe the difference between sword and divide is not so great. Even so, we may be tempted to say that since the sayings are not so old and even differ in their wording that the harshness does not truly reflect what Jesus said. We may also excuse the saying by pointing out that Jewish teachers often relied on hyperbole to make a point.

This focus on sword that disturbs peace and divides families seems to fly in the face what Jesus says elsewhere. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says that to remain faithful to his message about God's realm, one must turn the one's cheek if someone strikes you. If someone demands your coat, you must also give them your cloak. If a Roman soldier forces you to carry his pack for mile, you offer to carry it for two. You are to love your enemy because if you love only those who love you, then what reward do you have?

Later, in the Garden of Gethsemane, when Jesus was arrested, the gospel writer of Matthew tells us that one of his disciples pulled out a sword and sliced off the ear of

one of the High Priest's slaves. In the face of this violence, Jesus tells his disciple to put away his sword because those who use the sword will die by the sword.

Do these examples sound like a teacher who says that he does not come to bring peace, but a sword? How can this one verse outweigh the rest of the gospel?

At best, then, the passage is confusing; it contradicts the rest of the gospel; but we cannot unhear it—the passage is there with a sword and divided families hanging out for all to see. The question challenges us: who or what do we love more than Christ? If this kind of division is really a requirement of faith, how long would the church survive?

Last week during the conference I attended, one of our speakers, Dr. Jeffery Jones asked some of these same questions about the ethics of Jesus. He pointed out that the church must reclaim these ethics; too often the church follows the ethic of empire that says it is alright to pursue wealth, to accept the prevailing culture that sacrifices the other for the benefit of some of us, where concern for what one eats or what one wears is seen as responsible, and the love of parents for their children, and children for their parents is expected.

Empire thinking becomes our way of living, so much so that we are addicted to them. We deny that such things are truly an addiction; wealth, scapegoating, and expected behavior are just the ways of the world and they don't really mean anything—even though we know that they do.

If we are to reclaim Jesus' ethics, then we have to let go of that which connects us to empire.

Jones' lecture got me to thinking about Paul. Before Paul had his dramatic conversion experience, he was also part of empire. In his letter to the Galatians, Paul talks about his strict adherence to his faith. He could proudly trace his heritage back to Abraham and his faithfulness to the Law. He kept the Law which directed him in how to love God; he wore the right clothes, he ate the right foods, he honored his parents, and he participated in the system that collaborated with the Romans. His ardor for this system was so fierce that he participated in the persecution of those who followed Jesus. He saw these followers as heretics to the proper faith and as a clear and present danger to his faith.

All this ardor and zeal changed when he encountered Christ on the road to Damascus. What he discovered is that this encounter emptied him of his focus on the Law; with this dependence to the Law gone, he was free to discover the love and grace of God

in Christ. Into the emptiness came the Spirit and, at last, he could see literally and symbolically that he had been addicted to the Law as a way to prove himself to God rather than allow God to love him fully and wholly.

The Spirit helped him to gain a new perspective on the world; it even changed his relationship with the world around him. This change was not always welcomed by his old world; sometimes, Paul faced persecution, stoning, exile, and jail. Paul remained free to love even those who might have claimed him an enemy. Paul's transformation by the Spirit began a transformation of the world.

We can understand why Paul writes what he writes in his letter to the Romans. For us to change he says, we must die to the old way of life so that we might rise to new life in Christ. We must rid ourselves of what addicts us to destructive things where we are willing to sacrifice the other for our benefit or ways that threaten any of God's children or God's good creation. We must empty ourselves of fear, hate, and destruction so that we might be filled with the Spirit in order to embrace God's love for us and God's love for the creation.

Paul's life reminds us that to live into our baptism is risky business. Our baptism is a sign that we are willing to be filled with the Spirit so that we might live in faithfulness and love. When filled with the Spirit, we cannot be satisfied with the prevailing powers of this world that preach the sword and self-satisfaction. Jesus knew that to embark on the path of God's vision means that we cannot accept those who preach destruction of the enemy, hate of the stranger, and exploitation of God's good gifts only for one's self. Such faithfulness as Paul discovered will sometimes put us at odds with those who still embrace empire ethics. Yet Jesus does not encourage us to hate those still addicted to empire ethics, we can still respond with love even when it might be costly to us.

This embrace of Jesus' ethics does not just apply to us as individuals; such ethics are also meant for the community of faith. We must constantly examine ourselves as a faith community: are we being filled with the Spirit or are we trying to embrace the prevailing culture? The church must sometimes let go of trying to control our destiny with traditions and programs in order to trust God. Do we listen to where God calls us or are we trying emulate the way the world defines success?

If we die to our old lives, we know that we rise to life in Christ. We can trust that God calls us to new ways of being. Will we trust God enough to follow?