

I know that you all received word that I am leaving St. Peter's- that Sept. 18 will be my last Sunday with you- and I will have something to say about that in my sermons in the weeks to come, and certainly in my last sermon from this pulpit. But today I want to focus on this really difficult text we just heard from the Good News of Jesus the way Luke sees it. This is definitely not one of those "gentle Jesus meek and mild" or Prince of Peace Gospel passages. In fact, Jesus seems to describe himself as more of a happy homewrecker- dividing families and turning the popular political notion of family values on its head. Instead of the Norman Rockwell family we have slammed doors, raised voices, crossed arms, and meals in silence- all because of Jesus. And if we want to just blame this on Luke, saying Luke put some words in Jesus' mouth, we can't because we have to contend with a very similar passage in Matthew as well. "Do not think I have come to bring peace...but a sword." So Jesus seems pretty committed to this concept. What is going on here? Where is the good news?

Of course I'm fine with being divided from all those who cheat, who hurt me or who, to use baptismal covenant language, "corrupt and destroy the creatures of God". But, my family? Yes, they can be annoying at times, but I actually really love them-and they have taught me much about the love and

forgiveness of God. Now, I am well aware that some of us did not learn about love in our families, but rather learned about cruelty and exclusion-and that being separated from them, closing them out of our lives is in fact the only way to health and wholeness.

But here Jesus isn't talking about toxic families in general, he is talking very specifically about divisions between parent and child, siblings, spouses, partners, caused by him- by what happens when he shows up in their lives. He is talking about what happens to our carefully ordered relationships when he asks us to put God first in our lives and follow him anywhere he leads.

Some who hear his invitation to follow will leap up from the family dining room table, knocking all the food off it, and run out into the streets- telling everyone they meet the life-giving story of Christ. Others will stay and pick up the food, smoothing everything over. I mean, the Gospel is great and all, but it is no reason to make a mess or interrupt a meal now is it? What's important is being a good citizen and being polite to your neighbors, not making a spectacle of yourself. Another family member will just sit quietly eating, not remotely aware that anything has happened, or, if aware, complaining about how everyone else in the family is nuts. And if we think

about it we have probably heard just such stories. Adult children who discover how much money their widowed Mom has been sending to a church food pantry having her declared mentally incompetent. The parent who won't speak to her children because one has declared herself to be an atheist and the other goes to a church where they speak in tongues.

And here's the startling thing about this whole situation: Jesus never says this won't or shouldn't happen. Rather, he says these things are inevitable. He says the Gospel will divide people, families. Jesus takes Jeremiah's observation that God's word is like a hammer that breaks rocks in pieces and really runs with it.

As always, context is important when sifting through a Gospel passage. Here, Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem and was likely really stressed out. He knew he had a lot of work to do and that he had very little time left. So he didn't have a lot of sympathy for people who used family or work as an excuse not to follow him. "Yeah, I'd love to trot right after you, but I have to say goodbye to my family", said one. "I have to bury my father", said another. And Jesus said, no. No you don't. The greatest claim on your life is God's and when God calls, you go. Loyalty to God is primary, non negotiable, and not one of many allegiances to be juggled. It is, he said, a

matter of life and death, though perhaps you have to be on the road to Jerusalem to really know that.

Of course, a careful Gospel reader will know that this particular attitude was not necessarily new to Jesus. When he was just a baby and was brought to the Temple by his parents, Old Simeon had noted that “this baby was destined for the falling and rising of many in Israel” and, looking at Mary had said, “this child will pierce your heart with a sword”. When he was twelve he had given his parents a near heart attack hiding out in the Temple while they took off for home, and, upon being found, sort of snarkily said, “well where did you think I’d be? Of course I’d remain in my Abba’s house”. And, perhaps in the most telling story, when his family came to visit him on one of his teaching tours, someone waded through the crowd to tell Jesus that his family was there to see him and his chilly response was “My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it.”

Ouch.

That may seem harsh, but my take on it is not that Jesus didn’t like his family, or was cutting them off, because in other passages he shows affection for them. What he was doing here was nothing short of redefining family. No longer did family have anything to do with DNA, or who was the

spitting image of whom. Now it had everything to do with in whose image you were made. All siblings in God. So family suddenly looked like lepers, tax collectors, scruffy blind old men, bleeding women, smelly fisherfolk, Roman centurions, wealthy women who dealt in purple cloth and children-lots and lots of noisy children.

As Barbara Brown Taylor, whose thoughts and words influenced this sermon observes, “Jesus was not walking around in a family tree, but in a family forest, with relatives gathered from all over the place”, all children of the same Abba. In this family people learned what was right and wrong, learned an awful lot about love and forgiveness, learned what was really worth living for and what was not. True, there was a lot of squabbling, still is, but in following Jesus they found a family that could weather the storms because it was grounded in belovedness and made in the image of the One who is pure love-even though it did run a sword right through his mother’s heart.

So for all the political talk about family values, and the sappy commercial images of families, Jesus’ actual family values may freak us out a bit. But if we can calm down a minute and listen, there actually is Good News even in this story for those who can bear listening. The Good News, the Gospel, is

not flashlight but fire, not a knife but a sword. It can set free and it can divide. It is not sappy at all-it is unimaginably powerful-powerful enough to challenge even the most sacred family ties we humans have.

And those who know that peace is not the absence of conflict, know that the peace of God is worth anything it takes to get there. The Gospel truth, the Good News, is that in Christ we have something both worth fighting about and something, someone, strong enough to end all our fighting. For his word, Christ's word, is like fire, and like a hammer that breaks a rock into pieces.

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