

“A Peacemaker, Not an Enabler”

“Do you think that I have come to bring peace on the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division!”

After spending my first year in an all-male student residence at Ursinus College, I had the opportunity to move into one of the off-campus student houses that lined Main Street. Isenberg Hall was an 18th Century house that was showing its age, including the holes in the walls in the room where I would spend the next three years. At first, my housemates and I tried to get the university to fix the holes; but when it became clear that this wasn't a priority for the administration, we decided to come up with our own solution. One of the people in the house worked at a record store and brought back a large supply of posters of album covers which we used as wallpaper to cover up the holes in the wall. It looked good to us at the time, but it really didn't solve the problem – the holes were still there.

Anyone who has been involved in home renovation knows that a problem isn't solved by merely covering it up or pretending that it doesn't exist. Sooner or later, the issue needs to be addressed, because many times it will only get worse. This is also true of many other aspects of life, including human relationships. We may pretend that all is well in a marriage, a family, or a community; but covering up or ignoring a problem that might seriously affect the health and viability of a relationship will only make the situation worse. Papering over a problem is never a good way to address a serious issue.

In today's Gospel lesson, Jesus makes it clear to his followers that he has no intention of papering over or ignoring the serious issues that are threatening the future of God's people. Jesus has come to bring God's peace, but the work of redemption does not include ignoring the seriousness of the human situation or accepting the status quo of sinfulness that has alienated humanity from God and from one another. Although the Kingdom of God is characterized by reconciliation and peace, the announcement of that kingdom is always divisive because it requires decision and commitment.

While Jesus' words may sound shocking to us, they should not be surprising given their place within the context of Luke's Gospel. When Jesus' parents present him at the Temple in Jerusalem, they are met by Simeon who first praises God *“for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples”* (Luke 2:30-31) and then warns Mary that *“this child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed – and a sword will pierce your own soul too.”* (2:34-35). John the Baptist warned the people who came to the Jordan to be baptized by him that *“one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire. 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.”* (3:16-17). When Jesus visits his hometown synagogue in Nazareth and proclaims that the prophecy of Isaiah *“has been fulfilled in your hearing”* (4:21), his neighbors who once spoke well of him are filled with rage and *“led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff”* (4:29). Because he has experienced division as a result of his ministry, and because he knows that his journey to Jerusalem will include additional experiences of opposition and division, one should not be surprised when Jesus asks *“do you think that I have come to bring peace on earth? No, I tell you, but rather division!”* (12:51).

- “At this point in the story, Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem, where the conflicts he has been experiencing will boil over into a plot to take his life. And Jesus knows this. He knows, that is, that he will soon be baptized not by water but by the fire kindled with nails and wood, and just now he feels the weight and pressure of what is to come.” – David Lose.

In the midst of an ongoing conversation with his disciples, Jesus declares that *“I came to bring fire on 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!”* (12:49-50). Fire is often used in Luke as an image of God’s judgment (*“Even now the axe is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.”* – 3:9). With the coming of the Holy Spirit, the work of the Church, and the approach of the Kingdom of God, division and strife would be intensified. Jesus knows that he will not be spared from this hostility; his allusion to “baptism may refer to his death or to the conflict and distress in which he would be immersed as he approached Jerusalem. In Mark’s Gospel, he warns his disciples that *“the cup I drink you will drink; and with the baptism with which I am baptized you will be baptized”* (Mark 10:39), a warning confirmed by Paul when he states that *“all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death”* (Romans 6:3) and by Dietrich Bonhoeffer who wrote that *“when Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die.”*

- “The call to discipleship, the baptism in the name of Jesus Christ means both death and life. The call of Christ, his baptism, sets the Christian in the middle of the daily arena against sin and the devil. Every day he encounters new temptations, and every day he must suffer anew for Jesus Christ’s sake.” – *The Cost of Discipleship*.

While it is Jesus’ mission to bring about “the peace of God which passes all understanding” (*“For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us ... so that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace”* – Ephesians 2:14-15), division would precede reconciliation. Those who commit themselves to Jesus must prepare for the opposition they will face, sometimes even from their own families. The message “peace on earth” will not be received without savage conflict; wherever the Word of God has been heard, division has occurred among the people who heard it:

- “When they heard these words, some in the crowd said, ‘This is really the prophet.’ Others said, ‘This is the Messiah.’ But some asked, ‘Surely the Messiah does not come from Galilee, does he? Has not the scripture said that the Messiah is descended from David and comes from Bethlehem, the village where David lived?’ So there was a division in the crowd because of him.” – John 7:40-43.

The division that will result from the proclamation of the Word of God will affect all relationships, including family: Jesus warns that *“from now on five in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three; 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.”* (12:52-53). Jesus experienced such familiar tension when his mother and brothers came to speak to him; instead of allowing them to divert him from his teaching, Jesus proclaims that *“whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.”* (Matthew 12:50).

While Jesus’ words may sound shocking and harsh, he is not teaching that his followers should abandon their families, nor is he teaching that families have no place in the kingdom of God. In response to the

Pharisees' testing him as to whether *"it is lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any cause?"* (Matthew 19:3), Jesus answers by pointing these teachers of the Law back to their own scriptures:

- *"Have you not read that the one who made them at the beginning 'made them male and female,' and said, 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh'? So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate."* – Matthew 19:4-6.

One of Jesus' last words on the Cross concerns his mother's ongoing care: *"When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, 'Woman, behold your son.' Then he said to the disciple, 'Here is your mother.' And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home."* (John 19:26-27). In his *Table Talk*, Martin Luther teaches that marriage and family are gifts of God that are a central part of the goodness of God's creation:

- *"When one looks back upon it, marriage isn't so bad as when one looks forward to it. We see that our mothers and our fathers were saints and that we have the divine commandment, 'Honor your father and your mother' [Exod. 20:12]. When I look beside myself, I see my brothers and sisters and friends, and I find that there's nothing but godliness in marriage ... The longing of a man for a woman is God's creation..."*

But while Jesus is not advocating that a disciple turn their back on their families, neither is he teaching that they allow their families to draw them away from following Jesus, nor will his ministry allow serious issues and problems to continue unabated. Jesus has no desire to be an enabler, to paper over the problems affecting both one's family of origin as well as the human family. Jesus has come to be a peacemaker, but not the false peace that does not bring about true peace, the *shalom* that is the *"peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give you as the world gives."* (John 14:27). Those who first heard Jesus' words would have been very familiar with the peace *"the world gives,"* the peace that the Roman Empire enforced through power and oppression. They knew that this peace did not result in any sense of well-being or wholeness; it was not the peace that God intended for humanity. The *"peace that the world gives"* may have prevented open hostility, but it merely papers over the true problems that are dividing persons and keeping people from enjoying the abundant life that Jesus intended for them to enjoy: *"I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly."* (John 10:10).

Jesus is well aware that the peace that he offers will be opposed by those who will view it as a threat to their own status and self-interests, those who benefit from the divisions and hostilities present in society. He is aware that many people would rather keep things the way they are rather than risk following Jesus along a different path. Jesus knows about the power lure of *homeostasis*, *"the tendency of any set of relationships to strive perpetually, in self-corrective ways, to preserve the organizational principles of its existence."* (Edwin Friedman). Many people are so afraid of change – even change for the better – that they would rather *"paper over"* the problems that exist in their midst rather than exposing them and dealing with them so that they might no longer have a negative impact on their lives. Jesus knows that the forces that are aligning against him are very powerful and will attempt to destroy him on the Roman Cross at Golgotha.

But Jesus also knows that unless the paper is ripped off and the problems are seen for what they are that no true peace, no true healing can take place. It's similar to a person who denies that they are ill or attempts to cover over or mask their disease. Facing one's illness and taking the necessary steps toward healing are often difficult and painful, and it often takes a skilled and courageous doctor to confront a

person so that they realize that maintaining the status quo will only make matters worse. Jesus does not come to bring “peace” if it means ignoring the human sinfulness that has separated people from God and one another and has set humanity on a path to its own destruction. He has come not to be the enabler of the human condition but to be its Saviour; he has redeemed us from “*sin, death, and the power of the devil, not with gold or silver but with his holy, precious blood and his innocent suffering and death.*” (*Small Catechism*). In his death and resurrection, Jesus defeats the power of death so that it might no longer threaten to separate people from the love of God; “*for if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.*” (Romans 6:5).

- “For our sin is slain through his death – taken away, in order that it may no longer live in us but die and be dead forever. Being immersed in the water of baptism indicates that we too dies in Christ, but emerging again from the water means and imparts to us new life in him, just as he did not remain in death but rose again. But such a life should not and cannot be a life in sin, because sin has already been slain in us and we have died to sin; it must be a new life of righteousness and holiness.” – Martin Luther, 1535.

By its very nature, baptism creates a division; when we are baptized in Christ Jesus, we declare that we believe that he is our Lord and Saviour, and renounce any loyalty or allegiance to anyone or anything else. When we confess our faith in the triune God, we also renounce “*the devil and all the forces that defy God ... the powers of this world that rebel against God ... [and] the ways of sin that draw you from God.*” (ELW Holy Baptism). In the early church, this decision to follow Jesus meant abandoning the faith of one’s family, causing the division of which Jesus warns. Becoming a Christian often came at a high cost: it meant sacrificing one’s familial ties, one’s occupation, one’s place in the community, one’s status, and even one’s very life. This division from all that was safe and familiar for the sake of the Gospel of Jesus Christ is addressed in the first letter of Peter, who reminds his readers that even though they may have paid a high price because of their faith in Jesus Christ, what they have received in return is of far greater value:

- “Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that is taking place among you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice in so far as you are sharing Christ’s sufferings, so that you may also be glad and shout for joy when his glory is revealed. If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the spirit of glory, which is the Spirit of God, is resting on you.” – 1 Peter 4:12-14.
- “But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were no people, but now you are God’s people; once you have not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.” – 1 Peter 2:9-10.

A few years after my graduation, I returned to my university campus and took a walk over to Isenberg Hall. The door was opened, and as I wandered inside I was glad to see that the holes in the wall – and all of the other problems with this old house – were no longer being papered over and ignored but had been addressed through a major renovation. While I did not benefit from this investment of money and effort, I was happy that future residents wouldn’t have to endure the substandard conditions in which we lived during our student years. Covering up a problem only enables it to continue, and the situation only gets worse.

We are not called to be enablers of the sinfulness that is festering inside the body of Christ and threatening the health and vitality of the Church of Jesus Christ. Healing and reconciliation also include

tearing off the covers that mask our sinfulness; it means confessing that we are not what Christ has called us to be and asking our Lord to restore and reform us. It is not an easy task, and it will inevitably lead to division because there are *“people [who] loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil ... But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.”* (John 3:19, 21). Our call is to walk as children of the light, so that we might know that *“when we have run with patience the race, we shall know the joy of Jesus.”* (ELW Hymn 815). We are called to be peacemakers, not enablers; we are called to reject the status quo that allows sin to destroy the Body of Christ while engaging in the difficult work of healing and reconciliation so that we might be the Church that shines the light of Christ so that *“they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven.”* (Matthew 5:16).

Amen.