

August 14, 2022
Luke 12:49-56

Pentecost 10
Pastor Jeff Laustsen

“Broken Ties”

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

Troy’s Lock Shop was a fixture in downtown Plainfield for generations. It was the leading locksmith in the community, a business to which people turned when they needed keys copied, locks installed or changed in their homes, and when they locked their keys in their cars. The business had been run by generations of the Troy family and was a great source of family pride. The three brothers who guided the business during my childhood were reliable businesspeople and community leaders, and each of them prospered in their profession. So, it was a shock when it was announced that Troy Lock Shop would be closing; at first no one understood why such a successful business would cease to exist. It was soon announced that the reason the shop was closing was that none of the children of the Troy brothers felt a call or desire to become locksmiths. One child was studying to become a doctor; another child was an accountant, while a third became an airline pilot. All of the children were successful in their own fields, and their parents were proud of their accomplishments, but the fact that none of them wanted to continue the family business was a source of disappointment and tension among the Troys, for whom being locksmiths as a central aspect of their family identity.

Families are our most central and important relationship; but families can also be an arena for tensions, animosity, bitterness, and resentment. My father’s family endured generations of acrimony between two of my grandmother’s brothers whose feud went on for generations and was never resolved. Families can be a source of strength and support, but they can also present obstacles to a child’s development and career goals. Family expectations can be onerous when children are expected to continue the family business or fulfill their parents’ unrealistic expectations. While we rejoice in the family ties that bind us together, many of us have experienced broken family ties that can create division and tension that lasts for generations.

Today’s Gospel lesson addresses what can happen when family ties are broken among those who answer Jesus’ call to discipleship. This is the continuation of Jesus’ teaching on discipleship as he continues his journey toward Jerusalem, knowing what awaits him when he enters to the Holy City. While Jesus has come to bring God’s

peace (*“Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives.”* – John 14:27), the work of redemption inevitably brings division as well. 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. As Jesus had warned those who would become his disciples, *“if any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.”* (Matthew 16:24).

Jesus begins his teaching with the unsettling announcement that *“I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled!”* (Luke 12:49). This announcement was foreshadowed earlier in Luke’s Gospel when John the Baptist announces that Jesus’ baptism will be far different than the baptism he practices in the Jordan River:

- *“John answered all of them by saying, ‘I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.’”* – 3:16.

Fire is frequently 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 will be a sign that divides one’s motives and inclinations like a sword, requiring a piercing spiritual discernment.”* (Jerusha Matsen Neal). Jesus himself would not be spared from this hostility; he is fully aware that *“I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what stress I am under until it is completed!”* (12:50). His “baptism” may be an allusion to his death (*“Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?”* – Mark 10:38), or it may refer more generally to the conflict and distress in which the world would be immersed as he approaches Jerusalem. For Jesus, *“baptism leads to death on the cross so that we might have life.”* (Erick J. Thompson).

Jesus’ next statement is one of the most difficult of all his sayings: *“Do you think that I have come to bring peace on earth? No, I tell you, but rather division!”* (12:51). This seems to contradict our understanding of Jesus as the “Prince of Peace,” the child born to fulfill Isaiah’s prophecy that *“a child has been born to us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace”* (Isaiah 9:6), the one whose birth

is celebrated by the angelic chorus “*praising God and saying, ‘Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favours!’*” (Luke 2:14). But the celebration of the birth of our Saviour is accompanied by a warning spoken by Simeon to 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). Jesus would be the first casualty that necessarily attends the proclamation of God’s Word; they would suffer opposition and his own family would be pierced by its effects. He is rejected in his home synagogue in Nazareth when he declares that the prophecy of Isaiah “*has been fulfilled in you hearing*” (4:21), to the point where many people who were his closest family and friends “*got up, drove him out of the town, 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). Jesus experiences the painful reality that his proclamation of the Word of God has brought division among those closest to him, that “*no prophet is accepted in the prophet’s hometown.*” (4:24). Jesus’ experience of division and hostility from his family serve as a warning to those who would follow in his footsteps, that other families would later be divided by faith and unbelief. Division would precede reconciliation; the Kingdom of God would not bring peace – at least not immediately. It would bring division and conflict. Those who commit themselves to Jesus must prepare for the opposition they will face, sometimes even from their own families. The prophecy of Micah is being fulfilled, the prophet’s warning to “*put no trust in a friend, have no confidence in a loved one; guard the doors of your mouth from her who lies in your embrace; for the son treats the father with contempt, the daughter rises up against her mother, the daughter-in-law against the mother-in-law; your enemies are members of your own household.*” (Micah 7:6). Jesus repeats the warning of Micah in his announcement 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 daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law.*” (12:52-53). It is a warning that the decision to believe in Jesus Christ as Lord will put them at odds with the religion of their families and their families’ loyalties to the *Pax Romana*, their loyalty to the Roman Empire that demanded fidelity to the emperor as a god and devotion to Rome above all else. The basic Christian confession of faith that “Jesus Christ is Lord” implies a rejection of the lordship of Caesar, and this would result in persecution and opposition not only from government authorities but often from members of one’s own family whose loyalties were to Caesar, not to Christ. While Christians confess their faith in the one who is truly the “Prince of Peace,” other family members would prefer to “keep the peace” with the powers that be. These verses explore the other side of revelation,

commitment, and kingdom values. 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 division in the crowd because of him.” – John 7:40-43.

Peace, Jesus warns, has its price; the absence of conflict is not a present possibility for his followers. One can only choose the cause to which to fight and the commitment that are worth holding; *“the call to decision is a call for division.”* (E. Earle Ellis).

- “Jesus warns that persons who make a commitment to him will find their relationships to others, even those closest to them, affected by that commitment. We cannot make a commitment to Jesus Christ as Lord without it affecting the way we relate to friends and to family members. Because our commitment to Christ shapes our values, priorities, goals, and behaviour, it also forces us to change old patterns of life, and these changes may precipitate crises in significant relationships.” – Alan Culpepper.

The second part of Jesus’ sayings to the crowds centres on the weather in Judea, Samaria, and Galilee that is controlled by the Mediterranean Sea to the west and the desert to the south and southwest. It was well known that *“when you see a cloud rising in the west, so immediately say, ‘It is going to rain’; and so it happens. And when you see the south wind blowing, you say, ‘There will be scorching heat’; and it happens.”* (12:54-55). If the crowds pay attention to the slightest change in the weather, *“why do you not know how to interpret the present time?”* (12:56). As the chapter began with a warning to *“beware of the yeast of the Pharisees, that is, their hypocrisy”* (12:1), he now warns the crowds about engaging in the same hypocrisy (*hypocrisis*), wearing a mask of piety that like the Pharisees conceal their inner corruption. “The present time” (*Kairos*) apparently refers to Jesus’ works and warnings as signs that the kingdom of God was at hand and that the fulfillment of God’s promises in God’s *Kairos* is near, the time when *“the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them”* (7:22).

- “Jesus’ saying challenge us to examine the inconsistencies between attention and neglect in our own lives, but the underlying challenge is to consider whether these inconsistencies reveal a pattern of prioritizing the insignificant while jeopardizing the things of greater value and importance. Have we paid as much attention to the health of the church as we have to our golf score? Have we given as much attention to the maintenance of our spiritual disciplines as to the maintenance schedule for our car? Where in the scale of our attention to detail does our devotion to the teachings of our Lord rank?” – Culpepper.

Today’s Gospel lesson is one of the most difficult and disturbing texts in our Sunday lectionary. It is a reading that many preachers avoid, choosing to focus on one of the other lessons assigned for this Sunday. But before we dismiss Jesus’ words or take a razor blade and cut them out of our Bibles, we need to understand that Jesus’ words serve as a warning, not a command, about what following our Lord may mean to our family relationships. Being a follower of Jesus does not necessitate our renouncing all ties and allegiances to our families; one of Jesus’ last words on the Cross shows how our Lord cared for his mother even in the hour of his death:

- “When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, ‘Woman, here is 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.

The first commandment concerning our relationship with others teaches us to “*honour your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you*” (Exodus 20:12). In the *Small Catechism*, Martin Luther teaches that “*we are to fear and love God, so that we neither despise nor anger our parents and others in authority, but instead honour, serve, obey, love, and respect them.*” Being a Christian and caring for our families are not mutually exclusive; as my bishop reminded me the day my father died, “your first call is to your family.” But there may be occasions when our call to follow Jesus may put us at odds with the people we love. While my family was always supportive of my pursuit of the call to ordained ministry, many of my seminary classmates faced opposition from their families, especially families who felt that they should be pursuing other occupations that promised greater financial rewards. Jesus is not demanding that we reject our families to follow him; he is warning that being a disciple of Christ may place us on a path that will not be followed by others in our families who make other choices and have different allegiances. It is a painful reality that Jesus faced in his life, and one that his followers might endure when the decide

to follow Jesus. But even if we find ourselves divided and alienated from our families, we continue to love and pray for them that they too might know that they are beloved children of God and may one day embrace the faith in Jesus Christ, who is truly Lord of all.

- “The Church of Jesus cannot arbitrarily break off all contact with those who refuse his call. It is called to follow the Lord by promise and commandment. That must suffice. All judgment of others and separation from them must be left to him who chooses the Church according to his good purpose, and not for any merit or achievement of its own. The separation of Church and world is not affected by the Church itself, but by the word of its calling.” – Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

The closing of Troy’s Lock Shop was an occasion of tremendous sadness for both the Troy family and the Plainfield community. But while the family mourned the loss of this business that was a central part of its identity, over time they grew to accept their children’s decision and were supportive of the career paths they chose to follow. They saw how each child made a positive contribution to their family and communities in their various occupations. While none of them became locksmiths, they used the gifts with which God had blessed them to serve others and support those they loved. Our decisions to believe in Jesus Christ and Lord and follow his paths may place us in opposition with the expectations and choices of our families. While such divisions can be painful, we continue to pray that as the fire that Jesus brings is not for destruction but for the purpose of life and love, our families may bear witness to the light of Christ that shines in our service in Jesus’ name, and that they too may “*see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven.*”

Amen.