

"Is Jesus Divisive?" (14Aug16)

Luke 12:49-56;

Hebrews 11:29-12:2

I've been practically giddy all week about this Bible reading.

Which I know sounds odd since this won't rank among anybody's favorites. But I relish the chance to struggle with Scripture, to wrestle with it until it releases a blessing for us.

In contrast, a month ago we heard the Good Samaritan, which is both so familiar and also almost self-explanatory. Be nice to each other, including some new people—it seems to say—or accept help from unexpected sources. You almost inherently can understand that, and barely would need a preacher.

With this passage, however, you're left with two choices. Either you can claim that the Bible and religion are filled with too much nastiness and try to ignore and reject the whole spiel, or else you can hear these hard words, face the confusing dilemma, and exclaim, "Aha! This is why we pay Pastor Nick the big bucks!" So now we'll see if you're getting your money's worth.

That comes with the immediate disclaimer that I don't have a definite answer or resolution for you, but do have several possibilities to try on.

First, we may hear these words from Jesus simply as descriptive: there are divisions on earth. We may even find that on occasion to be a good thing: night and day, the weekend, our atmosphere separating air from outer space.

Other times, we sense division not necessarily as beneficial, but still at least as reality. Across the globe, we don't all speak the same language. We don't have the same skills or interests. And while Jesus may be indicating the individual differences or denominational disparities or interfaith turmoil that religion has caused, of arguments and separations in our families on up, still, stepping back from emotion,

we are at a point in history where we might be able to recognize that there are real reasons we wouldn't all have the same understanding of God, that our unique circumstances and upbringings and lot in life play a role.

That's a fundamental distinction already in Jesus' words. He was part of the monotheistic Jewish faith, but where they'd said the only, the sole, the mono- connection with God was in the Temple, Jesus was relocating the divine, taking away the hierarchy that made some closer to God and pushed others out of the perimeter. Simply by proclaiming the undoing of a central authority and enacting radical welcome with unconditional grace, Jesus was causing division and disrupting the old system.

That may point us toward a next step of reflection. Beyond description, is this word from Jesus prescriptive? Does he seek to cause divisions?

I have to say, this is mainly what makes this passage uncomfortable for me. This version from Luke, where Jesus says he brings division, is a notch gentler than Matthew's version, where he says he brings a sword. But still, when Jesus declares he has not come to bring peace on earth, that disappointment is the exact opposite of why I usually turn to Jesus and what I expect from him. Some of the first things that grabbed me about Christianity when I was in middle school were words like "blessed are the peacemakers," "turn the other cheek," and "love your enemies." These shaped my passion for nonviolence and even pacifism, to be against war and militarism and the death penalty. But here, Jesus seems to reverse his core message of love and healing and life, and—indeed—peace!

But that very reversal is the cue that we need to struggle with these words. Certainly there are some who employ this sort of message to reinforce violence or oppression or division or

use of force. But the fact that they have to turn repeatedly to this passage or to an apparently angry Jesus cleansing the Temple or a single line about swords at the Garden of Gethsemane says that these hard passages are the exception and not the rule of Jesus.

So I would argue—and will argue—that Jesus isn't stoking fires of hatred and fanning the flames that make us burn against each other. This isn't a sort of division that lets me see myself as good and other races or religions as bad, much less worth-less and able to be excluded or exterminated or deported. Those have been dangerous precedents in history and are dangerous in our midst today. Such divisions are accusingly satanic, not godly or from Jesus. That is not God's mission or intention for our world, and it must be resisted.

But that very resistance begins to illuminate another side of these words from Jesus. It's not general divisiveness he promotes, as if desiring any and all animosity. But there are specific faithful distinctions that we would foster, that Jesus would back, when he's prompting change and upset against tranquil apathy at the status quo. Such "peace" he may well be against. Amid plenty of divisions, we should readily and boldly proclaim, "I'm not that sort of Christian. We are not that kind of people." We want to declare proudly and vitally that we are anti-racist and anti-sexist and anti-bullying and anti-oppression and anti-poverty. We are anti-terrorism but simultaneously anti-anti-Muslim and anti-anti-immigrant (if you can handle important uses of a double-negative) and anti-anti-gay. We know these divisions and know where we must stand for justice. Sure, we can work to heal the splits and repair the breach with other people, and that may be among our more vital tasks in these days, but that doesn't permit us to ignore the divides or to pretend

that compromise plain and simple is always the right thing.

That's hard enough when we'd prefer not to have to keep struggling amid society. We don't want to feel like a voice in the wilderness, crying out. We don't want every election to feel like a doomsday scenario or for every click of news to be filled with despair. But beyond those larger fears and frustrations, we also know this more intimately. We know divisions in families, conversations that cause consternation, the topics that somehow are off the table for discussion. We know those family fractures that are fueled by even kind and faithful views.

Such values may arise from stuff that seems like a big deal, like arguing faith's perspectives on health care. Or that your beliefs mean you're called to love Iranians and Russians, and—yes—even terrorists, and all those with whom you disagree. That's not a fun conversation. Or it may be more personal, like around parenting styles or medical decisions or financial choices. Or it may seem smaller, like that you'd choose to be here today, that you intentionally give away some of your income, that you do the silly thing of saying a prayer in times of need. We may not be persecuted or our lives at risk for what we believe, but among your family and friends and coworkers—besides the broader culture—clinging to your beliefs is still apt to cause divisions. Jesus may have been envisioning that result simply because of what matters to you.

It's already a relief that Jesus recognizes and names the brokenness we're bound to face. It's good news that my family isn't the only one God knows with some dysfunction. But beyond just naming the reality, we do need more. Clearly, this involves difficult decisions to weigh and really requires endurance and patience to persist. So we need support. We need this community. We need the great cloud of witnesses, those saints throughout history that

our Hebrews reading held up for us. We need examples of those who have willingly or unwillingly suffered and were mocked and continued through blood and sweat and tears, and conquered somehow in death, even as the loss appeared to be overwhelmingly futile. It's a stunning Bible passage, making us ask if it's worth it, even while motivating us to carry on. We're caught up in something we can't quite explain and may not always like, yet know we must proceed.

And that brings us to a final part of the reflection. We should always remember that Jesus is up to something particular. With him, it is not just a description of everyday life, but a new way of seeing and interacting with the world, a new order, for new life. He begins by saying he's bringing fire to earth and wished it were already kindled, and his stress while awaiting his baptism. These are lines about his death. He isn't kindling a fire to start fights among others or to give us permission to take up the sword against those we don't like. He's inviting that division against himself, recognizing that he's the one who's going to get burned, the one who will be plunged into death. This makes the Bible passage about him.

But that also makes it about you, doesn't it? See, you've been baptized into Christ as well. Your baptism joins you to the resurrection of Jesus and the promise of new life, but also joins you to his passion and death. Amid the communion of saints, you are brought into this Jesus way, this Jesus vision, this Jesus practice for encountering the world, and striving both against it and yet simultaneously on its behalf.

That means the fire is spreading. Jesus kindled it against himself, but also in you. It's remarkable that the one other place these words for division and fire happen together is on Pentecost (Acts 2:3), when divided tongues of flame appeared on the followers of Jesus,

filling them with diverse gifts and sending them across the world. Among those believers, this word for division also became a word for sharing—that they divided among themselves the cup of the new testament in Jesus' blood at the Lord's Supper (Luke 22:17) and divided their possessions to distribute as any had need (Acts 2:45).

In this community of Jesus, then, we no longer recognize the world's old, rotten divisions of haves and have-nots, of rich versus poor, of insiders and outsiders, winners and losers, successful or failure, the good and the bad, the ugly and the beautiful, the worthy and the unworthy. In this community of Jesus, those divisions are cast out because finally, this is where we anticipate reconciliation will have the last word, since neither death, nor life, nor things present, nor things to come will be able to divide us or separate you from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

Hymn: *God of Tempest, God of Whirlwind*
(ELW #400)