

Sunday, 14 August 2016

[drawing the line - Luke 12](#)



[Luke 12:49-56](#)

Our image of Jesus tends to be a very gentle image. There are pictures of Jesus walking along with a flock of sheep with a little lamb in his arms. We tend to think of Jesus as incredibly accepting and non-judgmental. We tend to view him as a very nice man that wouldn't hurt a fly.

So when we hear readings like we have today it can be a bit shocking.

"I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! ... Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division!" (Lk 12:49,51).

Those are not the words we tend to hear on Jesus' lips.

We tend to gravitate towards the comfortable teachings of Jesus and avoid the uncomfortable teachings. We love

the story about Jesus and the woman caught in adultery (Jn 8). Jesus faces off with a crowd that wants to stone the woman according to the law. Jesus replies that those who are without sin should throw the first stone. Of course no one does. It is the image of the non-judgmental Jesus- The accepting Jesus. ... But, we usually forget his final words to the woman, "Go and sin no more". Jesus was not accepting of sin. Jesus was giving her a chance to repent and change her life- a chance she would not have if she was executed. It was mercy, yes, but he was not easy on sin.

In fact, there are a number of times that Jesus actually makes the law harder. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus says that you might think you aren't a murderer, but your unchecked anger at someone might condemn you as a murderer even if you don't commit the act. You might think you have never committed adultery, but the lustful thoughts you entertain in your mind condemn you as an adulterer even if you have never committed the act (Matt 5). In first century Judaism divorce was quite easy, but Jesus said he didn't allow it (Matthew's gospel adds 'except for sexual unfaithfulness', but Mark doesn't give an exception) (Matt 19; Mark 10). Sometimes, when Jesus seems to be altering part of the Law, he actually makes it harder, which is counter-intuitive to our usual understanding of Jesus.

In Matthew 25 we read about Jesus separating people into the saved and the condemned at the time of the

final judgement based on who has helped those in need and those who have not. He talks about a narrow road that leads to salvation and a wide road that leads to destruction. Jesus talks about a coming judgement and a place of weeping and gnashing of teeth. He says that those who want to follow him must pick up their cross and die to themselves. That isn't the Jesus we often think about. We don't want to overemphasize this, but if we are going to have a clear image of Jesus, then we have to include the uncomfortable bits as well. We don't like to hear about judgment, or warnings, or the severe expectations of holiness.

So before we get into this passage we need to just admit to ourselves that there is an uncomfortable side to Jesus that we often try to ignore. Even our Sunday readings often avoid these kinds of uncomfortable readings.

As I mentioned before, Jesus in this reading is speaking about being the cause of division. He says that he will even be the cause of families being split up. In the early church this was a reality on a number of levels. The early followers of Jesus were mainly Jewish, but began to live in greater and greater tension with the Jewish synagogues. Eventually these Jewish Christians were not welcomed in synagogues. This could mean that a family was divided between those that believed and those that didn't- and we shouldn't under emphasize the impact of that. In our world we tend to be okay with everyone believing a variety of things. In the first century families

were tighter and there was more of an expectation that the family will have the same beliefs. Belief in Jesus as the Messiah could divide families. ... In the non-Jewish world when people became Christian there was an expectation that they wouldn't participate in certain parts of public life because it often involved Pagan worship. That might mean looking strange to business partners, and officials. They also would have had different ethical and religious standards. Their sexual ethics would have to change, for example. And that would put tension on existing relationships.

There was also tension regarding the way to live in Israel under the influence of the Roman Empire. Jesus taught a way of non-violence, but many desired a violent uprising led by a warrior messiah that would remove the Roman forces from Israel. Israel, in Jesus' day, was in a state of incredible tension (some things don't change much). The land was occupied by the forces of the Roman Empire and they were growing tired of the continuous rebellion and resistance of the people to their presence and rule. Some of the Jewish people continued to plan rebellions to try to defeat the Romans and drive them out. There was believed to be a lot of corruption in the leadership, as well as a wealthy and arrogant religious elite. There was tension on numerous fronts.

In the middle of it all Jesus is teaching a way of non-violence and calling people to repent and join a Spiritual

Kingdom of people living God's way. He sees the crisis looming and he sees the destruction coming. This is the coming storm Jesus says they should be able to predict. The people chose the way of violence against the Roman Empire and in 70AD the people are crushed, the nation is destroyed, and the temple is demolished never to be rebuilt. So part of the division Jesus is speaking about may be about the division between those who choose the way of violence and those who choose the way of peace. Those who chose not to pick up arms against the Romans might have been considered traitors.

But every generation has this tension to some degree- the tension between the ways of the Kingdom and the ways of the world. There will be moments in our lives when we will be asked to side with our culture or with the ways of Jesus. ... Our culture will want to say everyone has their own truth, or maybe even 'there is no Truth'. The kingdom will have us say Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life. Our culture will tell us that sex is a recreational activity for two consenting adults and is no one else's business. The kingdom will tell us that sex has a design and it's not to be misused without serious consequences. We might be being told by our family or friends to fear refugees. The kingdom says to welcome the stranger even if it's dangerous to us. Our culture will say spend your money how you like, you deserve it. The Kingdom says, God owns it all- give it away so you have treasure in heaven. The more we are committed to following Jesus, the more tension we will probably feel

with the standards and expectations of our broader culture.

If you try to talk to your friends and family who aren't Christians about Jesus and the way he taught us to live, there will be moments of tension. It is likely that 'religion' will become a taboo conversation topic marked by uncomfortable silences, eye-rolling, or heated arguments.

But the division doesn't stop with our culture and our family and friends. We will also feel divided in ourselves. As Paul says in his letter to the Romans, "For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing" (Rom 7:18-19). We live with tension as we try to live in the ways of the kingdom. We will find ourselves frustrated with ourselves. We will find that a sin will haunt us that we don't seem to get mastery over. Maybe we are tempted to act out of arrogance, maybe we gossip, maybe we constantly are judging people, maybe we struggle with pornography, maybe we allow our thoughts to get lost in hopelessness, maybe we act in selfish or greedy ways, etc. We all tend to have something. The friction between wanting to live in the ways of the kingdom and the internal desires we live with can feel like a fire. So as we follow Jesus we will not only have division with our culture and maybe our

family and friends, but we may even feel divided inside ourselves.

This division isn't what Jesus wants, but he knows that at some point we will have to make a choice between following Him and following some other voice. Following him is what is best for us and for our world. We might be able to live our lives free of this tension at times, but there will be times when we will have to make a choice as to which kingdom we are going to be a part of, and when that happens we will find ourselves divided from those who have chosen a different path. May God grant us discernment to know when these times are, and may we be granted the courage to stand for the Kingdom, even if it means those around us. AMEN