

June 21, 2020

This is one of those Gospel lessons that make everyone uncomfortable. We have Beelzebul, the prince of darkness. Someone had accused Jesus of being the head honcho of evil. And it starts a big conversation with the disciples.

Jesus seems to sum it up by saying, “I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.” Then he talks about divisions that go right through our closest family relationships-- a son against his father, a daughter against her mother, and so on and so forth. I’ll be honest, it’s hard to understand.

Today I’d like to do some reflecting on these divisions. What is Jesus talking about?

Quick story... It was about ten years ago; I went with a group of church people to an alternative worship service in a large church in one of the first-ring suburbs. It was on a Sunday evening, maybe a couple hundred people there...

The main speaker just simply came out and sat on a stool. He was dressed pretty casually; he was wearing jeans. The lights dimmed and they put a spot light on him. Everyone in the audience fell quiet.

He started by talking about that particular faith community. And all the ways in which they were different... He emphasized, over and over again how they were genuine and authentic about following Jesus. And I’ll admit, I felt a little defensive, I remember thinking, “Well, I’m genuine and authentic about following Jesus!” I confess, I thought he was self-righteous, I got a little turned off, and almost right off the bat...

Then he started to talk about Christian unity, and as a way to demonstrate it, he introduced a number of Clergy from different traditions, who were all dressed up in very colorful robes and stoles and they took seats directly behind him within the spotlight. He introduced them, but they didn’t say anything.

And I'll tell you, I don't think I've ever seen such an extravagant looking group of Clergy, ever in my life. In addition to the robes and stoles, they had capes and chasubles, funny looking hats, shoes... I don't know what traditions they were from, but I wondered if they were invited because of their outlandish vestments. It seemed disrespectful...

Their mere presence meant they were in some way in agreement with the message, but to me they looked terribly uncomfortable. I started to wonder if these religious people, like me, felt a little slighted, and also a little used...

I started to cringe, the whole situation felt weird, I started to feel sorry for the Clergy representatives, they must have felt like they were on display.

There was one black pastor in the group and I started watching him closely, because his body language indicated he was terribly uncomfortable. He tentatively sat on the edge of his seat, and looked like he was ready to stand up and walk off at any second.

At one point the speaker made the sweeping assertion that Jesus never talked about division; but always talked about unity. And the black clergy person winced. I saw it, my colleague next to me saw it, and we looked at each other, and she said under her breath, "For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother." The very scripture we have for today...

The sword that Jesus brings, the division that Jesus kindles goes to the very heart of righteousness and judgment. Judgment is necessary in our lives as we make decisions-- which is all the time! Generally speaking, good decisions make good outcomes... Poor decisions typically end up with consequences and negative outcomes. We all need good judgment in our lives. Good judgment is like a rudder for our lives.

There's judgment, and then there is being judgmental. That different. Jesus has a lot to say about being judgmental. He says, "Judge not, lest yourself be judged... And, the judgment that you give is the judgment that you receive." In other words, what goes around comes around...

It's this self-perpetuating cycle of violence... Finger pointing, blaming, accusing, it just keeps going around and around... I see it on full display on Facebook every single day! It's Republicans and Democrats, it's CNN and Fox, it's Catholics and Lutherans, we've all seen it... This never-ending self-righteousness and being judgmental...

The division that Jesus brings has everything to do with stopping that cycle of violence. Jesus redefines righteousness, he says, "whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me."

In other words, righteousness is not in being judgmental or crucifying others to get what we want, righteousness is crucifying ourselves to love our neighbor. It's a completely opposite view of righteousness and judgment. And the reason it goes right through our families and closest relationships is because it goes against all common sense. It's a paradox, like most spiritual matters...

Back to my story... I could see how uncomfortable the clergy were behind the speaker. They were shifting in their seats, eye rolling... I'm sure they disagreed with most of what the speaker was saying. And I'm sure they felt a little offended, and on display... And I know that at least one of the Clergy wanted to make a point by getting up and leaving...

And at the same time, I don't think the speaker meant anything mean or cruel. He didn't know the bible very well, he misquoted Jesus a number of times, and he was just a little blind about his own self-righteousness...

In the end, the clergy endured, they just sat there... I was amazed, because I think I might have left... And in the end, they all got up and congratulated the speaker, like he had just said the most profound things ever. They all shook his hand enthusiastically, and hugged him.

I sat and watched the whole thing, and I thought to myself-- ***the ones who were preaching God's word, were the ones that didn't say a single thing.*** While being judged, they did not return judgment. They died on the cross of their righteous judgment to build up a brother in ministry. They were not interested in splitting hairs...

The good news is that “even the hairs of your head are all counted. So, do not be afraid; you are of great value...” God’s love for you is beyond anything you can possibly imagine. And because of that love, we love one another.

And we find that it’s in the serving of one another, that we not only find our greatest calling, we also discover that abundant life. “Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.” It’s absolutely true!

It’s in the giving, that we receive...

Amen...