

Proper 15—Year C—Luke 12:49-56

”Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division!..father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, etc” Who wants to have to preach on this? If we secretly or not so secretly want a plastic Jesus with pink cheeks, this is not the passage for us. But, they say, this is precisely why we have a lectionary. It forces us to look at Scripture passages we may not like, as well as favorites.

Nowhere is the sheer honesty of Jesus more evident than here. Here Jesus presents the Christian life at its most demanding and most uncompromising. Luke uses the word “division.’ Matthew makes it even more graphic: “I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.” A real situation that existed in the early church sometimes was the choice between family and Christian faith. A person’s worst foes as a Christian might be his or her own family members. The essence of Christianity was loyalty to Christ, which had to take precedence over the dearest loyalties of this earth.

Before Christianity became legal, it was considered highly honorable to lose one’s life for the faith. Even in modern times, there have been famous martyrs. One was Dietrich Bonhoeffer. . It is highly significant that Bonhoeffer lost his own life because of his Christian discipleship. Bonhoeffer was a 20th century German pastor and pacifist theologian. He became convinced that allowing Hitler to remain alive and active was an even greater evil than murder. Therefore he became a leading spokesman for the Confessing Church, which was a center of protest against the Nazis. He had a chance to escape the whole situation by taking refuge in the United States, but he chose to stay in his own country, where he could be active in the resistance. He ended up in the Buechenwald concentration camp and was hanged.

Another 20th century martyr was Oscar Romero, a bishop from El Salvador. He protested his government’s injustice to the poor and policies of torture. On March 23, 1980, he preached a sermon calling on soldiers to disobey orders that violated human rights. The next day, he was shot to death while celebrating Mass. Four Maryknoll sisters and nine Jesuit priests were also murdered in El Salvador because of speaking out against an oppressive Regime .

In the 21st century, Christians are still martyred regularly. Many are the victims of extreme Islamic fundamentalists. Most Muslims deplore the activity of the extremists. Other Christians are oppressed because they live in countries like Cuba. In the 1960's, Fidel Castro promised to rid the country of religion within 10 years. 50 years later, there are eight times more Christians in Cuba than before. There are strict regulations against house churches. A church can only be constructed if there is a building permit, and permits are never granted.

.But what of us, who live here where various religions can be freely practiced and where we will probably never be martyred? We can go right back to today's Gospel. A person sometimes has to choose between their closest ties on earth and loyalty to Jesus Christ, or choice between one perfectly legitimate religion and another, or a Christian may have to choose between one form of Christianity and another. Division amongst families because of religious differences continues. You can all probably think of examples of family division, but here is one: Some years ago, a woman showed up at the convent door. She had never been here before, but had seen the sign out by the road. She was feeling desperate, and she thought a convent must have somebody who could help her. She had been born and raised a Fundamentalist Christian. Her brother was the pastor of an independent fundamentalist church and she herself had been active in the church. But as time went on, she began to question some of the tenants of the fundamentalist church. For example, she wasn't at all sure about a literal interpretation of the Bible. She began to seek out other churches, including the Episcopal Church, to see what she could learn. Her family questioned what she was doing. She tried to remain as quiet as possible, but could only evade them so far. Her brother told her that she was going to burn in hell. Because this woman had been so imbued with the fundamentalist theology in her childhood and young adulthood, the woman had secret fears that her brother might be right about her. When she appeared at the convent door, I happened to be around, so I met with her and we ended up meeting for years. I did my best to explain liberal views of Christianity and lent her books by authors like Marcus Borg. She was delighted to learn different approaches to Christianity, but once in a while, fear of her family and their views crept in. In the end, there was a family division between the fundamentalists and those who had begun to think more like my friend.

No matter who we are, if we are to really make a commitment to Jesus and his teachings, we will find our relationships affected by that commitment. Commitment to Christ shapes our priorities,

values, goals, and behavior. That commitment forces us to change old patterns of life. Our families may or may not go along with us. We will gain new friends with similar values and perhaps lose some of our old friends.

I have been wondering why unity is a more pleasant topic than division. I don't think It's just because unity is "nice" and division is "bad." I think it is because unity is more deeply true. At the deepest level, we are all made in the image of God and I don't believe anyone is doomed to hell. But although we may intellectually understand that we are made in the image of God, few of us realize our identity that completely. So each of us is only a pilgrim on the way to truth. We will see truth differently from other people, perhaps differently from our own families and sometimes our distinctive visions will cause division. It is for each of us to determine which truths are most important to us. Then we can decide whether the division which may result from holding to those truths is worth the time, effort, and energy.