

Proper 7Ai - June 22, 2014
Genesis 21:8-21; Psalm 86:1-10, 16-17; Romans 6:1b-11; Matthew 10:24-39
By The Rev. Kevin D. Bean

“I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.”ⁱⁱ

In the last stanza of the hymn, “They cast their nets in Galilee,” we sing a verse that resonates with our readings today:

“The peace of God, it is no peace, but strife closed in the sod.
Yet let us pray for but one thing – the marvelous peace of God.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Now what does that mean? In our first reading in Genesis, we hear a rather disturbing story of a family being divided up, with Hagar and her son Ishmael having to leave Abraham his father. So, also, in our gospel reading, Jesus prepares his disciples for similar division between families. By the time Jesus is through with their training, hopefully neither he nor they will have any illusions about what may happen. If they are really about his purposes of healing, of justice, of repairing the world, they will not be met with brass bands and pink lemonade but rather rocks and riots. Following Jesus will not likely result in keeping close family ties, nor a long life, nor preserving a comfortable living – quite the contrary. So, anyone interested?! This seemingly dreadful gospel text is a preacher’s nightmare - or reality-check, as it were. By cutting across the most sacred social institution of Hebrew life, the family, Jesus thumps or trumps the fifth commandment—“Honor your father and your mother” (Exodus 20:12)—and sets his own claims above those of the family. More importantly, he redefines the family. Family is no longer just those who share the same name or address, but those who follow the same Divine Purpose. All those who are willing to lose the only lives they know – including some of their family relationships – will find new life with God and one another that will exceed their deepest hopes and dreams.

As we encountered in our first reading, this reading from Matthew’s gospel presents very hard and harsh language from Jesus about sorting out priorities and counting the cost. Even now, as then, Jesus does not look for part-time disciples. He doesn’t go recruiting at a temp agency. Discipleship means the commitment to follow Jesus and enter fully into his struggle to repair the world, and to restore ourselves and others to right relationships. The costs of this, for some, will mean changing their work. For others, it will mean challenging or even changing their personal relationships. For others, it will mean traveling more lightly. And, for others, it will mean blooming more fully right where they are planted. Commitment has its costs in some form or another in each person’s journey of discipleship, and its rewards are not always obvious.

Our readings today say that our highest priority should be our relationship with God and God’s purpose, thus making all other relationships with people and things secondary; but there’s the rub! Because to love others, especially strangers in

need, in pain, as an expression of our love of God – to love them without exclusion or judgment, and to take time and effort to seek to work with them for their well-being – puts us in tension with those who lay first claim or exclusive claim to our love, namely, those often closest to us – our families, friends and neighbors, even our very selves. Rather than maliciously or carelessly causing division, instead, paradoxically, Jesus’ own radical welcome and inclusion was so broad and deep that it occasioned reaction and division from his own people and his own family and eventually the Roman authorities.

Jesus even goes as far as to say, “Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace but a sword. (10:34)” Luke’s version is a little milder, “So you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division! (12:51)” The fulfillment of Jesus’ mission will not first result in, nor come by way of peace, but rather division. Jesus bears a word of peace, but it is a word that first divides rather than unites. The word for “peace” he spoke was “Shalom” meaning “right relationship” – a personal and societal fullness, where spiritual, social and physical needs are fulfilled so that people can be wholly and joyfully themselves. On the one hand, we hear Jesus say today, “I have not come to bring peace but a sword.” And on the other hand, he says later, “Peace I leave with you, my Peace I give to you. (John 14:27)” The seeming contradiction is resolved when we understand that for Jesus, the peace – Shalom - he brings is not just tranquility of mind nor the absence of struggle or conflict, but rather the presence of God’s truth spoken in love and justice, and made effective as far as possible. One translation renders the verses in Matthew and Luke’s gospel as “Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No. I tell you, I came to make people choose sides.” Jesus’ presence necessarily cuts the issue, demands a decision, a choice. Their “yes” has to be “yes”; or their “no” has to be “no.”^{iv}

And so, the first thing to be disrupted by Jesus’ version of peace was not “the system” – be it social, political, economic, or religious, but rather, the lives of his own people, his own followers, and his own family. Simply by choosing Jesus’ path, by unmasking bigotry and lies, deceit and injustice, we find some saying “yes” to this path and others saying “no.” We find division occurring even with those close to us. Parents or children or partners so often seek to avoid the hard issues and create a false family peace. Jesus sets his own claims above those of family unity, thus making an important point about the gospel’s power to polarize as well as unite. Jesus frees, unites and reconciles, but today we see that first he has to divide.

And from such personal and familial disruption we then connect with the world’s disruptions and divisive issues. Global warming and pollution; chronic poverty, famine, widespread disease, gender inequality, war and preparations for war; unsustainable development and the daily extermination of species (plant and animal) threaten all of us in every land. We are now slowly waking from a sleep of nearly 2000 years to this realization: that Jesus’ hard words to us today are the foundation of our very survival. We are told to count the cost of discipleship and

make a choice. What Christ requires of us today are not token measures or dishonest caution, but responses equal to the urgency and scale of these present crises and gathering catastrophes. To take up our crosses today—that is, to struggle for change that will likely generate negative reaction—means to find ways, for example, of breaking free from profligate and ecologically unsustainable ways of living that, as Gandhi said, prevent us from “living simply so that others may simply live.” This gospel is every bit as hard for me as it may be for you. That’s why we need to work with it—and why we need each other as a community of faith. This is the gospel—the good news—good, because it offers hope of our very survival. The cost is, and will be, painful. But we will pay for it voluntarily now, or involuntarily later. We still—barely—have a choice.

Today’s gospel is again a reminder that as a reconciler, Jesus at times does the opposite in order to expose personal, religious or societal deceits and lies that prevent real reconciliation. In other words, Jesus, at times, polarizes in order to effect real and just reconciliation. For Jesus knew – as one writer put it - that in the world as it is, laws are written for the lofty aim of the “common good” but are acted out in life often on the basis of the common greed.^v He knew that in this world the Golden Rule often means no more than “whoever has the gold, makes the rules;” — or “them that’s got the gold, rule...”^{vi} He knew that this is a world not of angels but of angles, where people speak of moral principles but act more on power principles; a world with two kinds of changers—the social changers and the money-changers. And so Jesus knew that in the world as it is, so-called “reconciliation” can mean no more than that when one side gets all the power and the other side gets reconciled to it, then we have “reconciliation.”^{vii} Jesus knew that in order to get to a loving, just, and real reconciliation he had to cut through, as with a sword, and expose the unloving attitudes and unjust power plays of individuals and whole social groups—whether they be Romans, Pharisees, his own disciples, or even his own family.^{viii}

Jesus’ words in Matthew’s gospel often have been seen in such a negative way: after all, unity is good, division is bad—right? In fact, for better or worse, division has been a feature of Christianity from its beginning. Jesus himself constantly confronted and corrected misinterpretations among his own followers; and different interpretations of Jesus’ life and mission caused early Christian communities to fragment, first from their mother Judaism, and then from each other. The truth is, division is not only inherent to our faith, it may actually be essential to it—although it does seem ridiculous that there are now more than 40,000 Christian denominations worldwide.

So, until Jesus comes again to definitively and universally establish the reign and peace of God, the specter of division will confront those who follow him. Faced with this abiding challenge, it is put upon the community of faith—all of us—to struggle with the paradox that those who work for God’s Peace will also be the occasion of conflict and division. It devolves to us today as members of Christ’s Body—his church—to examine the level of comfort or challenge with which we

bear witness toward each other and the world. If our individual and communal living and working in the Spirit of Christ sparks no fire and causes no division within our own ranks and especially with the wider society and culture, then we may become a model of lukewarm inoffensive Christianity—a burnt out bush, as it were.

“The peace of God, it is no peace, but strife closed in the sod.
Yet let us pray for but one thing – the marvelous peace of God.”

ⁱ See Epiphany 3A (#2); Propers 15C, 18A (#2) and 18C

ⁱⁱ If doing Track II, the sermon could begin:

Jeremiah spoke clearly the signs of the times in the Kingdom of Judah before, during, and after its destruction by the Babylonians nearly 2,600 years ago. In our first reading, he finds that he is damned if he does and damned if he doesn't. If he doesn't speak out God's word of justice and warning, he will suffer internal combustion. If he does speak out, he will become a divisive and dangerous radical and/or a laughingstock. Well he does speak out, and for his efforts he ends up at the bottom of a muddy well (38:6). But that doesn't shut him up. As Frederick Buechner adds, “The word *jeremiad* means a doleful and thunderous denunciation and its derivation is no mystery. There was nothing in need of denunciation that Jeremiah didn't denounce.” (Frederick Buechner, Peculiar Treasures: A Biblical Who's Who (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1979), p. 59.) Knowing that when he speaks for heaven, all hell could break loose, Jeremiah knew that his calling was no cake walk.

ⁱⁱⁱ Hymn 661, v. 4 from The Hymnal 1982 (New York: The Church Hymnal Corporation). See also “Once to ev'ry man and nation comes the moment to decide” Hymn 519 The Hymnal 1940 (New York: The Church Pension Fund).

^{iv} In the book of Revelation the grave mistake made by the church in Laodicea was their indecisive, indifferent surrender to lukewarmness whereby they had become a perfect model of inoffensive Christianity. Jesus, on the other hand, offends such mediocrity and indifference, and calls his church to do the same – which is not the same as seeing and acting on all issues in stark black or white terms.

^v Saul Alinsky, Rules For Radicals (New York: Vintage Books/Random House, 1971), p. 13

^{vi} Quoted in Brant Parker and Johnny Hart Remember the Golden Rule (New York: Fawcett Gold Medal, 1971). This the title of a collection of 1967 *The Wizard of Id* newspaper cartoons. In one cartoon, the king declares: “REMEMBER THE GOLDEN RULE!” A peasant asks: “WHAT'S THAT?” Another peasant replies: “WHOEVER HAS THE GOLD, MAKES THE RULES!” The more colloquial quote has been used for decades in the Civil Rights and other movements.

^{vii} Saul Alinsky, *Ibid.*, p. 13

^{viii} Now I am someone who has more often sought to mediate rather than choose sides; or when I am in conflict with especially someone I know well, I have found myself seeking reconciliation, sometimes too soon, often not acknowledging the seriousness of the issues that divide.

A creative tension, then, exists between the desire for reconciliation and the often divisive struggle for truth or justice. The peace sought by too early a reconciliation can come at the expense of justice or truth and can involve an accommodation and capitulation to the imbalance of power. And although reconciliation is not the first step in many struggles for peace with justice, that doesn't mean that the seeds of reconciliation can't be sown all along the way during the conflict. For example, simply listening to the other person or other side's point of view is a seed sown for reconciliation. Such listening does not prevent an effective way of addressing your just case

against injustice; rather, it has you enter into a process of opening yourself to the humanity of the other side, truly hearing and trying to understand. This involves touching a little of the fear, the hopes, the confusion, the feelings, and even the goodness of people who could easily be perceived as your enemy. In doing so, such listeners find their work for justice (whether personal or public) is not weakened, but, in fact, is strengthened. Compassion and the fight for truth and justice can walk hand in hand. Furthermore, sowing the seeds of reconciliation through listening even in the midst of big struggles rests on the belief that the Spirit of God exists in each and every person. It may be buried deep, but it is there somewhere.