

Pentecost 13C (8/14/2016)

Jeremiah 23:23-29

Psalm 82

Hebrews 11:29-12:2

**Luke 12:49-56**

*Jesus does not offer us peace on our terms. He calls us into a new way of relating, which, when we take it seriously, often engenders conflict and division. But even as community in Christ disrupts conventional social institutions, it also carries the promise of abundant life, especially for those who have historically been excluded from those institutions.*

Last fall, I noticed a fellow shopper at a grocery store sporting a navy blue sweatshirt with her congregation's name and logo on the front. On the back was a top-to-bottom list of religious priorities printed in lime green: God, Family, the Seahawks. Only in Texas does football fan culture border so closely on idolatry – well, Texas, and Eugene, Oregon, and Columbus, Ohio, and Alabama, and Florida, and Oklahoma.... Don't get me wrong, I love the Hawks. After all, converts to a religion are frequently more zealous than their native counterparts, and I converted just last season. I spend Sunday afternoons in the fall yelling at my television, too.

The sweatshirt I saw at the grocery store was designed in good fun, but it reveals something fundamental about our religious culture, something Jesus challenges in no uncertain terms in our Gospel from Luke today. If you're troubled by what he says, then you're paying attention:

Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division! From now on five in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three; they will be divided:

father against son  
 and son against father,  
 mother against daughter  
 and daughter against mother,  
 mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law  
 and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law.

I don't think Jesus is referring to families with divided football loyalties. *He has not come to bring peace, he insists, but division, and specifically division between fathers and sons, mothers and daughters.* What are we to make of this surprising statement? **Jesus' assertion takes aim at the heart of so-called family-centered Christian values.** It doesn't sound anything like "God, Family, and the Seahawks."

It would be a mistake to conclude that Jesus *advocates* division in this instance, that his statement is an *incitement* to conflict in his name. Jesus is certainly no righteous warrior. On the contrary, in an extraordinary reversal of worldly expectations, **he refuses the way of violent struggle, and instead endures the very worst of our antagonism, converting the world's hostility by his compassion. Jesus is the Prince of Peace;<sup>1</sup> he is the embodiment of God's "tender mercy," the light "from on high" by which God will "guide [our] feet into the way of peace,"** to borrow words from Zechariah's beautiful prophecy in the first chapter of Luke.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Isaiah 9:6.

<sup>2</sup> Luke 1:79.

However, while Jesus' pronouncement in today's Gospel is not prescriptive, it certainly is descriptive of the life of his first followers.<sup>3</sup> Those who renounced conventional options to pursue this nomadic rabbi from Nazareth were regularly subjected to conflict, and even conflict in their own households.<sup>4</sup> **Jesus' call to cross socially conditioned boundaries – to uphold the vulnerable, to join the outcast, to bless the enemy – is objectionable to those who subscribe to a more prevalent worldview, one that insists that vulnerability is to be avoided, the outcast is to be rejected, and the enemy is to be destroyed.** Exchanging one way of life for a radically different way of life is a recipe for discord, thus Jesus warns that sons will be set against their fathers, and daughters against their mothers.

**The cost of discipleship, in other words, is high.** This is a wake-up call for those of us who would prefer that Jesus remain nothing more than a decorative element in our lives. We would rather he not call us into a way of life that shakes up “the way we do things around here.” We want a Christian faith that coalesces with our other priorities: family, lifestyle, political affiliation, nationality. We want “God, Family, and the Seahawks.”

But **Jesus has not come to bring peace, at least not peace on our terms.**<sup>5</sup> If his claim on our lives asks nothing of us, then he becomes a mascot for the status quo, sanctifying our preferred values. But *that* Jesus – the

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<sup>3</sup> See Audrey West, in *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Vol. 3, 360.

<sup>4</sup> See David J. Lose, <http://www.davidlose.net/2016/08/pentecost-13-c-pursuing-a-faith-that-matters/>.

<sup>5</sup> David J. Schlafer, in *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Vol. 3, 361.

standard bearer for American civil religion – bears no resemblance to the rabbi from Nazareth, the true prophet who “has God’s word” and “speaks it faithfully,” in the language of our first reading from Jeremiah. And **the word that he speaks is an urgent word, a word that sets fire to our complacency and demands justice for “the weak and the orphan,” “defends the humble and needy,” and “delivers them from the power of the wicked,”** in the language of our Psalm for today.

So, Jesus has not come to rubber stamp the way of the world as it is. He calls us into a new way of relating, which, when we take it seriously, often engenders conflict and division. Indeed, **his life’s work leads inevitably to his own suffering and death at the hands of those who stand to lose when God’s kingdom comes on Earth as in heaven. But even as community in Christ disrupts conventional social institutions, to include the nuclear family, it also carries the promise of abundant life, especially for those who have historically been excluded from those institutions.**

**Dear church, Jesus redefines family according to God’s dream – the dream of a world where we no longer draw distinctions according to blood or culture or class, but afford each other dignity by virtue of our status as children of the same heavenly Father, kindred together with our brother Christ, and “a great cloud of witnesses” to the new possibilities the Spirit is still breathing into the world.**