



ST BART'S

A SERMON by:

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Uncomfortable Truth

Sermon preached at the 11 a.m. service, August 18, 2013

The Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Based on Luke 12:49-56

This is an uncomfortable Gospel text.

We might have wished, especially on such a mellow August Sunday morning, to hear kinder and gentler Gospel verses. But this is what we have today.

Which leaves us with choices. As preacher, I had the choice (and to be honest, a great temptation) to preach on the reading from Jeremiah—not significantly warmer and fuzzier—or on something else, anything else but this Gospel text. But I don't think we can hear a Gospel text like this and then just avoid it, leaving it sitting there in the aisle like the proverbial elephant in the room.

You have a choice, too. You can choose to “go to the beach in your head,” or otherwise check out for the next ten minutes or so. But I hope you won't. I hope you'll stick with me.

What might happen if we don't avoid a difficult text, but walk right up and meet it directly? Can anything good come out of an uncomfortable Gospel text?

Sometimes life does call us face-to-face with an uncomfortable truth, doesn't it? What happens in life when we have to face a difficult truth? What happens, for example, when we suddenly see a completely different side of someone we thought we knew?

“Do you think I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division!”

Wait a minute. This isn't the Jesus we think we know, or maybe the Jesus we want. What happened to The Prince of Peace? Where is “Peace on earth, good will to men [and women]”? What about earlier in Luke: “He will turn the hearts of parents to their children and the hearts of children to their parents ...”? (1:17)

Jesus felt it was ok to eat with anybody—tax collectors, sinners, and women. He touched lepers and healed all kinds of people. Ironic, isn't it, that Jesus erased so many divisions between people, yet here he is saying he is bringing division.

Jesus did, in fact, bring division in his day. His radically different way of being and of living, his radically different teachings, did upset the status quo all around him. Those who made a commitment to follow Jesus found that affected their relationships with others, even their closest relationships.

When Jesus called James and John, they left their father Zebedee flat in the family fishing boat. That surely wrecked the family business and probably broke their mother's heart.

Jesus left his own family, too: *“Your mother and your brothers are standing outside, wanting to see you.” But he said to them, “My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it.”* (Luke 8:20-21)

And just in the past few weeks, we've heard these stories:

“Follow me.” “Lord, first let me go and bury my father.” “Let the dead bury their own dead, but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God.”

And: “I will follow you, Lord, but first let me say farewell to those at my home.” “No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.” (Luke 9: 59-62)

I don't think Jesus comes among us for the express purpose of dividing families, but in some cases, that does happen. Luke's community, living as they did some 50 years after Jesus, would have known the reality of this division. It's easy to imagine, isn't it: one member of the family believes in this Jesus and follows him on The Way. Then s/he comes home with very different ideas of who can be invited for dinner—maybe even brings some of these other people home for dinner. Or comes home with very different ideas about whom it's ok to marry. Or what should be done with the family money. It's easy to see how a family's table fellowship can be fractured, how rejection can take root and grow. Luke's community would have also known members who were killed for following Jesus. As we know, loss can divide a family, too.

One of the most helpful things I found when studying this passage was the suggestion that we view it as **descriptive**, rather than **prescriptive**. [1] We can understand that Jesus is describing division as a reality, rather than blessing or advocating division.

Jesus is naming a hard reality in hard terms. His disciples and the early Christians had to make agonizingly hard decisions. They knew their decision to follow Jesus would put them in danger from their governments, that it could

separate them from the religion they had grown up with, could separate them even from their family. In many cases, it cost them their lives.

Sadly, these words of Jesus have been taken as prescriptive—as justifying division, even violent division—by Christians over and over in the 2000 years since Luke wrote them. Think of the Crusades. The Inquisition. Right on up to our present day, when violent action or violent rhetoric is so often used against the “they” who believe or practice differently from “we.”

The hard reality of division is still with us. Division happens within families, within churches, within countries. We’re watching Egypt now with horror and a sense of helplessness. Division can stem from many things. Division is not necessarily caused by Jesus or even by religion.

But in these verses Jesus names division in family relationships particularly—father, son, mother, daughter, mother-in-law, and daughter-in-law.

Many of us know something about division within families, perhaps more personally and painfully than we would wish.

Some of the hardest things I hear as a priest are about the pain of being estranged from one’s family. One has not talked to another in years. Another has been shunned because the family cannot accept that he/she is gay/lesbian/transgendered. Another feels judged, held at a distance, because s/he holds different religious beliefs than the others.

Some families avoid estrangement by creating a sort of a DMZ where you don’t talk about religion or politics or sexuality. That works, sort of, but those realities are still there.

And what about our church family? No secret that we have divisions and estrangements within our own Episcopal Church and within our larger Anglican Communion. It’s not just Episcopalians—other denominations are experiencing similar divisions. We are all trying to follow Jesus in our own ways, yet there are those divisions.

Or maybe I should say: We are all trying to follow Jesus in our own ways, divisions and all.

Some of the most tender and hopeful things I hear as a priest are how our church, The Episcopal Church, and St. Bart’s in particular, has brought healing (wholeness) to those who have faced painful divisions in their own families of origin and from the church they grew up in. The really good news is that it appears perfection isn’t required for healing to happen.

Listen to another version of this scripture, from *The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language*, by Pastor Eugene Peterson:

“I’ve come to start a fire on this earth—how I wish it were blazing right now! I’ve come to change everything, turn everything right side up—how I long for it to be finished! Do you think I came to smooth things over and make everything nice? Not so. I’ve come to disrupt and confront! From now on, when you find five in a house, it will be—Three against two, and two against three ...

Then he turned to the crowd: When you see clouds coming in from the west, you say ‘Storm’s coming’— and you’re right. And when the wind comes out of the south, you say, ‘This’ll be a hot one’— and you’re right. ... You know how to tell a change in the weather, so don’t tell me you can’t tell a change in the season, the God-season we’re in right now.”

God’s time, *kairos*, is not our time, *chronos*. We are still in the God-season, the critical time, the time for things to be turned right side up.

Following Jesus can re-shape our lives. It can change what we value. It can re-order our priorities. It can change our behavior. This kind of re-shaping can affect our relationships with those closest to us. When we do what we feel is the right thing to do, we can face surprising, uncomfortable, even painful opposition. Jesus himself knows how uncomfortable, painful, even devastating that can be. Maybe he is trying to prepare us to face divisions [2] Much like my father tried to prepare me to face things in life I had not thought of, had no idea of. When you hear about something, when it gets into your consciousness, you are better prepared to deal with it when you have to face it.

Even as Jesus prepares us to face the divisions we may encounter, Jesus is also giving us the tools we need to face them clearly—and to do more than just face them. Jesus is giving us the tools to erase divisions—to bring healing—whenever and wherever we can.

“Love God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength. And love your neighbor as yourself.”

Loving is healing.

Let the healing of our divisions begin here.

1. *The Christian Century*, 8/7/13, “Living by the Word” by Robert Saler, p 21.
2. “The Gospel of Luke,” R. Alan Culpepper, *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, Volume IX, p. 267.

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