

When Division is Grace

August 14, 2022

“It can be profoundly disturbing and unsettling – deep within our souls – when we look at the world around us and feel as if it is hurtling in a direction that is completely out of sync with who we are in the core of our being.

- When our friendships reveal unexpected patterns.
- When our relationships tilt.
- When our careers shift.
- When our social networks steadily (and at times seemingly irrevocably) fray.
- When our home ceases to feel like a refuge and instead becomes a place where we stay.
- When our health brings forth words we never thought we’d hear.
- When our visions and dreams seem to be slipping away, and pretending, once revolting, suddenly seems like the only way to survive the swirling uncertainty.”

This reflection from Krystal Cobran so deeply describes many peoples’ experience of the world right now. AND, it dovetails so powerfully with the Gospel for today.

Cobran goes on to reflect:

“Here is when distraction becomes most convenient. When deflection and distancing grow towards their greatest appeal.

Here is where connection is most needed. Yet feared. Because to connect in moments like these requires truth-telling within, the kind that can transform us at our core, that takes us further away from what is familiar, and pulls us towards the unknown.”

Division

Often, people think of Jesus and his message as simple, kind, and, let’s be frank, a little weak. He talks about love and forgiveness...but what about real life situations, like when people you love vote against your human dignity. What then, Jesus?

How in the world did a passage like today’s Gospel come into being? What could motivate Jesus to say things like this? It could be that people were trying to “make nice,” eliminating all possible controversy around Jesus. Remember, his ministry was about healing people who were not being served well by the current system freeing people from laws that diminished speaking truth to the power structures of his day that were unjust. So it’s pretty easy to imagine that he was controversial, and therefore there would be numerous people who were trying to smooth things over, saying, “he’s really not that ‘out there.’”

The other possibility is that people were actually telling him to tone it down. “C’mon, Jesus! The things that you’re saying are so radical that they’re tearing my family apart! My wife and daughter can’t even bring up your name without getting at each other’s throats. Can’t you just talk about the things that we hold in common, instead of all of this change stuff?”

We'll never be sure, but it must have been something like this that motivated our passage today. When you think of it this way, there couldn't be a passage more appropriate for our times.

Have you ever heard a follower of Jesus — or just an admirer — say, “Jesus would have voted Republican, but I think I'll vote Democrat?” No you haven't. Because each of us assumes that Jesus would believe what we do if he were here today.

I definitely do. I think Jesus would be in favor of marriage equality. I think he'd support common sense gun control. I think he'd welcome immigrants, feed the poor, regulate corporations and Wall Street heavily, oppose war, protect the environment, and understand that an abortion is sometimes the least bad choice among a set of really hard choices.

AND, I'm sure that every Christian who believes differently thinks that Jesus is on their side, too.

Good News

Now, I've helped us to understand that Jesus understands just how segmented life and society can be and how laws and structures and attitudes can pull families apart, but how does knowing that Jesus acknowledged the possibility of divisiveness in our most intimate relationships help our faith?

The answer, yet again, is to ask yourself “who would hear this as good news? For whom would this be liberating?”

The first person who comes to mind is the advocate for justice. Imagine someone under family's thumb, someone whose family was all about upholding appearances and the status quo, someone whose family anthem was “what will the neighbors say.” Imagine that person listening to Jesus and feeling the fire within to stand up against injustice, the freedom to become an advocate.

In today's political climate, there are families in which some people are following Jesus' lead and advocating for the poor and vulnerable while their family members are asking “why should I have to take care of them?” It's in a family situation like this that I can see Jesus saying, “I came to bring division.” So, if there is a way that you are being called to be more like Jesus, and your friends and family are holding you back, this passage is for you.

Other persons who come to mind when I ask, “who would hear this as good news?” are many members of the LGBTQ community. The heartbreaking reality for many members of the LGBTQ community is that many stay closeted because of not wanting to make waves, not wanting to upset the family, wanting to make sure dad or grandpa or the neighbors aren't scandalized. But remember what we just said the centerpieces of Jesus' ministry were? healing people who were not being served well by the current system, freeing people from laws that diminished, speaking truth to the power structures of his day that were unjust.

A Gospel passage where Jesus says that he came to divide families might give someone in the closet the courage to seek the health and freedom of being open and true to themselves. It may also give some comfort to those who have come out, and whose families weren't receptive. They

can look to this passage and say, “Jesus said this might happen,” and I hope that can bring some comfort. They can say to themselves, “I may have lost my family, but I can stand tall because I am being true to my God.”

My last example today of people who could hear this Gospel of division as good news are addicts who are struggling to recover. There’s an unfortunate dynamic within human systems to resist change. One of my former church moderators regularly reminded us that the only people who like to be changed are babies. Human systems resist change, and this is particularly difficult when someone in addiction chooses health and decides to step into recovery. Sometimes it feels like at every turn, usually subconsciously, families and friends often sabotage efforts at recovery. This is often due to the reality or perception that if that person changes, I’m going to have to as well. Their recovery is going to change things for me, too. To the person who is struggling to get clean, to recover, to find health, and who feels like their family and friends are dragging them down, today’s Gospel is good news. It may not feel good, but sometimes division, even from the relationships we hold most dear, is the freedom God is giving us.

Conclusion

Friends, today’s Gospel seems harsh at first. It gives us a very different perspective on Jesus and the vision of peace and the building of relationships we normally get. And while it is complicated, it is still a passage of hope. Everyone who seeks to build a world of justice, everyone who seeks to break out of the small world of appearances and into the wider world of grace, everyone who seeks to be true to the person God created them to be, everyone who seeks health, even beyond the unhealthy systems they’re currently a part of, all of these people can find hope here.

And so, our project this week is this: If this call to division resonates with you and your life, re-read Luke 12:51-53, and allow them to comfort you, allow their comfort to wash over you and convict you that you are on track. And, if this call to division doesn’t resonate with where you are right now, there’s someone you know for whom it would resonate. Find the courage to share this good news with them – division can be a good thing, can be Godly, if it sets you free.

The other Good News I would remind you of is that all of this is a cycle. Just as things break and shatter and fray, there is also a time of coming together and building and planting. The Godly thing to do is to live the lessons of right now, which in the examples I’ve shared today are examples of how fracturing can be a good thing, trusting that God won’t leave us in the brokenness forever.

May it be so – thanks be to God.

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Luke 12:49-56
August 14, 2022