

Wait 'til your Father gets Home

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Luke 12:49-56

Jeremiah 8:6-12

Psalm 82

'I have come to light a fire on the earth. How I wish it were ignited already!

⁵⁰*There is a baptism I must still receive, and how great is my distress until it is accomplished!*

⁵¹*Do you think that I am here to bring peace on earth? I tell you, the opposite is true: I have come to bring division!*

⁵⁶*You hypocrites! If you can interpret the portents of the earth and sky, why can't you interpret the present time?*

Each of these three sayings are hard enough by themselves, but does Luke have to lump them all together? The first echoes John the Baptist with fire and baptism; the second saying speaks of separation, especially with those whom you love and the third about reading the signs of the times.

This summer we may find a certain amount of resonance when Jesus says that the people know how to read the weather. A cloud rises in the west, you know rain is coming. The wind blows from the south, you know it is going to be hot. With all the apocalyptic weather conditions we have endured this year, we should be pretty good at reading the weather. Blizzards, rain, hail, heat, winds, falling trees, power outages. We know how to read weather.com. Can we also read the signs of the times? As Nelson Kraybill asked last week at Allegheny Conference: Do we see the empire crumbling? Are we alert to the impending decline of Christianity in this country?

Besides the difficulty of understanding these sayings, Jesus seems angry, maybe even stressed out. “I have a baptism with which to be baptized and what stress I am under until it is completed!”

And then there is Jesus describing his role, “not to bring peace but division” — among families, division primarily between people who love each other, who are bound together by blood and custom. Here Luke quotes Micah 7 when describing the division between father and son, mother and daughter, mother-in-law and daughter-in-law. (Neither Micah or Jesus says division will happen between husband and wife, but I did read this week that pastors have a very high rate of divorce, so today following Jesus can divide that way as well.)

In Micah, this division seems to come because people are not following God. Luke, on the other hand, seems to suggest that it is following God's way that brings division.

Add to this confusing mix the angry YHWH God that we hear in Jeremiah 8. God says the people are stupider than birds, accuses the scribes of falsifying holy texts, says that the so-called “wise” are not wise. They aren't even good nurses. In providing comfort and aid to those who are wounded they say “peace now, peace,” but with that much pain there is no peace. There is not even recognition of the pain that is there. Worst of all, they are not embarrassed by their bad conduct; they have no shame whatsoever for how badly, ridiculously, unjustly and dangerously they are acting.

Earlier this week, Kaye and I were trying to understand these passages. What kind of God is this? Kaye described it in simple terms: This is no comforting Mommy God; this is the “Wait ‘til your father gets home” God.

This is not a pretty picture; you don’t want to cross this God, you don’t want to get on this God’s bad side. This God deals harshly, taking away spouses and fields and causing the people to lose all that they have gained. (Jesus must be slightly related to this God when he says he brings division.)

Several generations ago this was the God that was preached, a lot. This righteous God was very present at tent revivals and forced people out of their seats and onto their knees. This God of justice scared children into personal commitments to Jesus and adults spent years running away from him. Even if we didn’t “walk the sawdust trail” ourselves, we heard our parents talk about tent meetings and that was scary enough. This is the God that inflicted so much fear and pain on us that we did not want to make our children go through the same thing.

What many children and teens are being taught instead is a nice God who in turn wants them to be nice. Researchers for the National Study of Youth and Religion call this nice God religion “moralistic therapeutic deism.” (“Faith, Nice and Easy” in **Christian Century**, Aug. 10, 2010) Authors of the study, Melinda Denton and Christian Smith, say that a creed for moralistic therapeutic deism would be something like this:

- A god exists who created and orders the world and watches over life on earth.

- God wants people to be good, nice and fair to each other.
- The central goal of life is to be happy and feel good about yourself.
- God is not involved in my life except when I need God to solve a problem.
- Good people go to heaven when they die.

This *is* a nice God. Play by the rules and you will be fine. Learn what you need to know in kindergarten and you'll get to heaven.

I am not sure which Biblical texts are used to teach this “nice” God but I am pretty sure that it wouldn't be this crazy text from Luke about division and families being pulled apart. Or Jeremiah 8 where YHWH makes fun of the people because the birds know when it is time to migrate but the people can't even figure out YHWH's law when it is right in front of them. A God who wants us to be nice to each other doesn't ridicule beloved creatures and creation.

What's missing in this new, happier and cleaner way of teaching faith is discipleship and an acknowledgement of the risks inherent in following the Jesus way. I don't hear anything about loving God with heart, soul and mind or about loving the neighbor. If the humans sound soulless, so does God. Where is the Holy Spirit, active and moving in our lives and in the world?

While we want our children to have a loving relationship with God, here at Hyattsville Mennonite I hope we don't go as far as the authors accuse many mainline churches of going. The faith we have inherited, and are passing on, takes the life and teachings of Jesus as our core, even the difficult sayings of Jesus. Jesus' prophetic approach to the world and challenge to those in power is combined with his welcome to children and those on the margins.

Taking the words of Jesus seriously means we sometimes also experience the division that Jesus describes. Many of us know what it means to be in conflict with others whom we love. We preach and pray for peace and yet we don't always experience peace in our families, or with the Allegheny Conference. Even here in the congregation we may not always agree amongst ourselves though we are sometimes hesitant to voice those disagreements. Jesus may have come to set mother against daughter and father against son, but if it is a Mennonite family they probably just avoid talking about it.

I have to admit that sometimes this text describing the division that occurs when we are followers of God and Jesus hits close to home for me. It is easy for me to see Allegheny Conference as the other, as the ones who are crying "peace, peace," when there is no peace, as those who are not paying attention to God's law, who are dumber than birds. But it doesn't take too many hours, while I am glorying in self-righteousness, for one of my children to call me on some inconsistent behavior of my own, "Mom, you can't say that, you can't do that, you are a pastor!"

This is the gift (and depending on your point of view, the downside) of the Bible. Just as we are ready to condemn another, the text comes right around and snags us as well. So perhaps it is not only Jesus that brings division but even the bible itself. While there are some Christians who sport the bumper sticker "God said it, I believe it, that settles it," it is not always easy to agree on what God says. This must be part of the division Jesus refers to.

As Mennonites, we don't like to talk about division. We don't fight; we are people of God's peace. So like the amoeba we just divide. But still to hear Jesus say that he "comes to bring division" is a hard pill to swallow.

Jesus is not telling us we must divide. This is a description of what can happen when Jesus is present; there can be division. This is not prescriptive, telling us how it has to be. It describes what can happen when we are following what we think is the way of Christ; we will divide ourselves from others. Sometimes we are divided even from others who also claim to be following Christ.

A member of the congregation sent me an email this week reflecting on the summer conversations the congregation engaged in. She writes:

My concern is that we drive wedges between ourselves rather than find common ground. It is so easy to point fingers and feel one is right, but that is not usually constructive (and may be wrong). How can I ever be sure I am right? I don't believe anyone ever knows without a shadow of a doubt, actually (and I don't believe we are ever sure that we are following "God's path," even if we think we are, even if we seek it, etc.). Yet I find it hard to "live and let live" when others may be intolerant and/or violent. How far can one be tolerant of the intolerant? How does one move forward with what one believes is the right thing (e.g., supporting same-sex marriage), without alienating other people who believe other things, thus simultaneously countering a different set of one's own values (e.g., finding common ground, being tolerant of others' views)?

Clearly consistency is not easy. How is it that our actions toward one family member that are meant to be loving offend another family member? How is it that we show compassion to a brother and yet affront a sister? Is it even possible to act decisively and compassionately at the same time? Is this what Jesus is describing, the division that following him brings?

Jesus doesn't give us a three-step process for how to navigate the divisions that occur when following him. He is not even always a good model when dealing with those who hold power, calling them hypocrites, liars, scoundrels. No wonder he got in such trouble with the religious and civil authorities. But with those who have less power, with those who are hurting and in pain, those who find no place for themselves in religious or social circles, Jesus has compassion, usually treating them with respect.

Jesus talks about having patience with the fig tree that doesn't produce fruit (Luke 13:6), about seeing possibilities in small seeds and yeast (Luke 13:18). There is encouragement to think for oneself and work at reconciliation (Luke 12:57). Jesus advises us not to worry (Luke 12:29). He also warns against pride and thinking one has all knowledge (Luke 11).

We have begun to re-engage in discussions with Allegheny Conference after almost five years of discipline. We have started conversations as a congregation about whether and how we as a faith community can be involved in same sex weddings.

Knowing that difficult discussions and faithfulness to Christ can lead to divisions, where does this leave us? Do we follow the 21st Century crowds that

seek a “nice God?” Do we succumb to “moralistic therapeutic deism?” Or do we return to the 18th Century with Jonathan Edwards knowing that we are all *“hanging over the pit of hell, that the devil stands ready to fall upon us, and seize us as his own?”* At the end of his famous sermon, Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God, Edwards gives us this hope — *The wrath of Almighty God is now undoubtedly hanging over a great part of this congregation. Let every one fly out of Sodom: “Haste and escape for your lives, look not behind you, escape to the mountain, lest you be consumed.”*

(<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/edwards/sermons.sinners.html>)

I suggest we turn to a much earlier century (about 700 BCE), to the words of the prophet Micah. Micah’s words are no less difficult but they do not try to make God into our own image as we like to do in the present. They do not leave us an incapable whimpering mass of fear and dread as Edwards does.

What does the Lord require of you? *God has already made abundantly clear what “good” is and what YHWH needs from you: simply do justice, love kindness and humbly walk with YHWH* (Micah 6:8).

O my people, let us do justice, love kindness and humbly walk this path, in the light of Christ.