

Sunday, August 18, 2013
Luke 12:49-56
Zion Lutheran Church, Stratford
Pentecost XIII – C

Jesus says, “Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No I tell you, but rather division! (Luke 12:51)

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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Discipleship is not an undertaking for the faint of heart. Today Jesus warns us that following him is costly. Obedience to Jesus’ call can cause deep divisions within our families and within our communities. However, both those who are called out of family life to follow Jesus and those called to reenter family life receive encouragement in our lives of faith from the “cloud of witnesses” that surround us.

Jesus’ words are difficult words for us to hear. We would rather try to ignore them or explain them away. They contradict our images of a meek and kind Jesus, who blesses children and who preaches making peace with enemies. At the beginning of this Gospel Luke announces the coming Lord who will “guide our feet into the way of peace.” (Lk. 1:79). The prophet Isaiah announces the coming of the Prince of Peace (Is. 9:6), who will establish God’s kingdom of justice and righteousness. Today’s text does not gel with those pictures of Jesus. Jesus announces that he has come not to bring to peace to our families and communities. Rather, following Jesus will bring divisions with those nearest and dearest to us.

We wonder what Jesus is really telling us. Jesus is under immense stress. Jesus has begun the journey to Jerusalem, where he will suffer crucifixion, death and be raised from the dead. His time on this earth with his disciples will be short. A time of crisis has come. In this sense, crisis is not a time of emergency. Rather, it is “kairos” moment, a time for decision, for making up one’s mind, whether to follow Jesus or not. Discipleship is costly for followers and their families at the time of Jesus. It remains so for his early followers and for the faithful today.

Imagine the disciple Peter approaching his family following Jesus’ invitation to follow Him. Peter greets his extended family with the announcement – “By the way, I will not be going fishing with you tomorrow in our family business. I won’t ever be going fishing on the lake again. You all take care of the boat and clean the catch. Be sure to pay the day workers and the taxes. Family, band together to take care of our parents, my wife and kids, and all the members of our family. Mother-in-law, I hope that you remain well and your fever does not return. I’m going off to follow Jesus, the man from Nazareth, as he travels around the countryside, announcing that the rule of God is here.

Such words would not fall easily on families’ ears in Jesus’ time. Kinship, one’s

extended family connection, was important. Extended families lived together, working to carry out household tasks and the family business, whether it be farming small plots of land or fishing. The tasks were all labour-intensive. All hands were necessary for survival. The contribution of each member of the kinship group was important for the well-being of the family. Children were trained into the family business. People in the group even developed family characteristics and behaviours. If one member deviated from the group, he shamed the whole family. Shame and loss of honour were important considerations in all social interactions. As a result families disowned people whose behaviour deviated from the norm. The consequence was division – feelings of betrayal on the part of the kin group and a sense of the family being shamed.

By the time that the Gospel of Luke was written, there were disciples who had answered Jesus' call to follow him. As a result of their decision they had left their kinship group with its social ordering. Families had disowned their deviant kin and written off their participation in the family. Division in the family had occurred.

We Canadians may think the dynamics of a kinship group are strange. However, there are societies in our world that maintain this family structure. A young woman of Chinese descent worshiped every week and attended Bible study in one of our parishes. Yet, she was not able to accept the gift of Baptism. The reason? Accepting the gift of Baptism would disrupt the kinship ties within her family. She knew that her family would disown her, should she take this step in following Jesus.

But, let's return to Jesus' followers who are called out of family life. Following the death and resurrection of Jesus, those first followers were called into a new family, the church. There they gained new brothers and sisters. Some were called back into their families later. There they became messengers of Jesus' ministry to their own families. Imagine Peter's or John's witness to Jesus in their extended families. Imagine their recounting their experiences of Jesus' death and resurrection to their families. Imagine their telling of Jesus' teachings. Hear listeners' amazement, as disciples told stories of God's healing acts for the physically and mentally ill, when Jesus restored them to life in their communities. A return to family life can become a call to faith and witness and service.

Family life in the extended family at the time of Jesus was restrictive. For those who answered Jesus call, discipleship meant leaving the family and adopting an itinerant life style. Obedience to the call to discipleship meant division in families and communities.

Today we have many different configurations of family life. We live in a world where the shape of families may vary -- parents and children, single parents and children, single adults, housemates, grandparents raising grandchildren. Adult children often live far away from their parents. Our families hurt because of unbelief, illness, addictions, abuse, and excessive work loads. We know that our family life and, by extension, our communities are not peaceful. Our families, too, experience divisions. Following Jesus can still lead to division in families.

We still live at a time of crisis, a time of decision. Following Jesus means we make decisions in the way we live the lives that God gives to us. For us, following Jesus may not entail a call away from family life. Rather, obedience to Jesus may call us to engage more deeply and more deliberately in our family life -- to become witnesses to Jesus in our families. Following Jesus calls us to discipleship, to begin adopting faith practices or to engage in them anew.

Living into faith practices can cause disruptions in the family. Discipleship changes our priorities. Engaging in deeper discipleship causes a reordering of family life, with all its confusion, tension, and potential for divisions. Even accepting Bishop Johnson's challenge to engage in deeper discipleship has potential to cause division in families. For example, Bishop Johnson challenges the church to engage in these practices –

1. faithfulness in weekly worship – The call to offer praise and thanks to God weekly meets challenges from work-weary partners, from teenagers out late at night, and children planning to play with friends. Potential for division exists here.

2. service to our brothers and sisters in Christ – This call challenges families to hands-on work for the benefit of the poor, the hungry, the homeless, the lonely. Ministry calls us to focus on others in our communities, rather than ourselves. Family members become divided over the worthiness of this ministry.

3. contributing a weekly offering proportional to family income – Making a family's offering for God's work in the world calls for a shift in a family's financial plans. Families become divided over spending priorities, especially when luxuries are reduced or eliminated, so that the family may give more generously.

Our experience tells us that Jesus' words are true. In our lives of faith we are presented with choices. In our lives as the baptized people of God we come to a crisis, the time to decide whether we will accept Jesus' call into discipleship. Jesus points out that discipleship is not easy. Our discipleship will result in making choices – choices that can cause disruption and divisions in our families and communities.

Discipleship can appear to be a lonely and divisive calling. Yet, God provides us with a cloud of witnesses, who encourage us in our struggle to be faithful disciples. These people of faith-- servants like Moses, Rahab, David -- all lived with hope in God's promises. They never lived to see the fulfillment of the promises. Yet, they persevered in hope and faithful discipleship. Witnesses have revealed to us our Lord's death and resurrection. We have lived to see the fulfillment of these promises. We are called to persist in faithfully following Jesus. God provides us with help.

We are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses, who have met the challenges of living in and witnessing to their families and communities. Because of their faithfulness to Jesus' call they have experienced division in their families and communities. The words from Hebrews encourage us to

“lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.

The witnesses encourage us in our discipleship as we follow our Lord to his cross and resurrection.

A member of the “cloud of witnesses” was Benny Wiese, a man deeply interested in ministry to young people. Benny was a retired railroad engineer and a faithful parish member. Benny was chosen by a confirmation student to serve as his mentor. Benny and this young man met a number of times to discuss faith questions -- such as what we believe as faithful people, how we respond to God’s call in our lives, how we live in our church family. Some of the discussions occurred on Benny’s boat, as the two traveled local lakes and rivers. At a time when the young man was developmentally separating from family, Benny came from outside the family to serve as one of the cloud of witnesses for the young man.

Our Lord provides us with faithful people who provide encouragement for us as we live as disciples of our Risen Lord. Whether discipleship calls us out of life with our families or whether it calls us to engage more deeply in our family life, these witnesses, faithful Christians, encourage us along the way. They are gifts given to us, as we face the divisions in our families and communities that arise from accepting God’s call to discipleship. Amen.