

Pentecost 13_Proper 15_Year C_081813_mcr
All Saints Episcopal Church

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

In the name of God, Creator, Redeemer, Sanctifier. Amen.

Well, this is one of those weeks when the Gospel reading makes you want to ignore it and turn to one of the other texts appointed for the day. It is harsh, more than a little intimidating, and uncomfortable to hear. So, what do we do about it?

Usually, reading and preaching biblical texts involves creating a bridge between the contexts of the biblical story and today's world contexts. Sometimes, the gap between those two is almost too huge to connect. This week is one such example. Most of the time, congregations avoid conflict and division at all costs, but here Jesus is talking about bringing just such division. We want peace; we call Jesus the Prince of Peace; we offer the peace of Christ to each other each week, and here is Jesus saying that's not what he came to bring us! We are - at least as Episcopalians - focused on the present instead of looking for the end of the world, but here Jesus sounds like he is looking toward the future, and it is a very grim one, indeed.

It seems pretty hard to relate to this passage when the context of our world is so different from the one Jesus lived in. So for this lesson to make any sense at all, we need to look at the context of the passage itself, trying to suspend our judgments and our desire to just ignore the words.

There is actually more than one context to this passage. The first one is the narrative context. At this point in the story of Jesus, he is on his way to Jerusalem, where the conflicts he has been experiencing will soon boil over into a plot to kill him. And Jesus knows it. He knows that he will soon be baptized, not by water, but by the fire kindled by nails and wood, and right now he is feeling the weight of what is to come. To use a word from our context, Jesus is stressed, stretched to the point of breaking.

So here is one way we can enter the story. Who of us doesn't know how it feels to be stressed - to be pulled by schedules and appointments and responsibilities and pressures beyond what we can endure? Jesus knows how it feels, too. Might he, then, have something to say to us today? Well, of course, Christians in the Western world are not facing crucifixion. But many of us are facing other serious stress - terminal illness, loss of job, deep loneliness, mental illness - the list goes on. In these and other situations, we feel pulled beyond what we can endure; Jesus has been there, too.

The other context is historical. Luke is writing about these events about 40 years after they happened and, as with all the Gospel writers, he writes from the perspective of addressing the situation and questions of his community. So we can infer that the division Jesus talks about in this passage was already present in Christian communities by the time Luke is writing.

This context might be a little more out of the ordinary for us. In North America, Christianity has not just been acceptable for a long time, it has become almost expected. Even though many pundits call this a post-Christian era, going to church causes almost no controversy. In many countries around the world, however, the confession of Jesus brings not only division, but physical danger and death as well.

All of this brings up a question that we should probably look at: is our 'easy' life as Christians in this country totally the result of cultural acceptance or is it because we fail to live into the gospel Jesus proclaimed? Throughout Luke's account, Jesus announces a new community - he calls it the kingdom of God - that is governed not by power but by equity, where all those in need are cared for, where forgiveness is the norm, where the poor are privileged, where wealth is shared rather than hoarded, and where the weak and lonely are honored.

At the risk of oversimplifying, there seems to be in this country quite a large divide between many who have power and wealth, and others who don't have as much power or wealth as the first group. The difference between them (again, not trying to simplify too much) is precisely in their attitudes toward those whom Jesus cared for. You know how it goes. Although both 'sides' claim to be Christian, one side makes it a point to withhold from those in need, citing the belief that if one is poor or hungry or lacking in whatever, it is because one is undeserving or lazy or unwilling to help him/herself.

And true equality - I mean for 'all God's children' - is rejected based on random, out-of-context, out-of-date verses from the Bible - or because of supposed pronouncements by Jesus in unwritten conversations. And the timeless obligation to provide hospitality for the stranger? Gone. Strangers are not welcome here, especially the strangers who are different from us.

Honestly, how do people who treat others this way really believe that they are doing what Jesus would do? I think we must be reading different books.

Here at All Saints, we do a lot of good work, caring for those who are hungry, for those families without homes, trying to make a difference in how our community works, offering what we have to share and offering respect and dignity at the same time. But we must not be smug about it. We can always do more. We can give a little more of our wealth - our time - our abilities to help those who need it. More of us can show up to help in the ministries we already have in place. We can use our creativity to help solve other problems.

I'll finish with what I think is one of the clearest, most definite passages attributed to Jesus about what it is we are supposed to do as his followers. From the Gospel of Matthew:

'Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.' Then the righteous will answer him, *'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?'* And the king will answer them, *'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.'* Then he will say to those at his left hand, *'You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.'* Then they also will answer, *'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?'* Then he will answer them, *'Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.'*