

Divided

August 18, 2019

It's pretty common these days to hear and read articles about our society being divided. You don't have to search very far to read a political pundit or a social commentator reflecting on our current state of affairs and concluding that we're a people divided. In fact, some even say that we're more divided now than we have been since the Civil War.

Well, I'm not sure of that. We often jump to extremes in the present, only seeing clearly in hindsight. Still, we're living in very divided and divisive times. No one can take exception to that.

So, when we hear Jesus talking with his followers and saying, "Do you think that I came to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, I came to bring division," it rankles us. It ties most of us up in knots. We've been taught that Jesus is the Prince of Peace. In almost all of the post-resurrection stories, Jesus' message is: "Peace I leave you. My peace I give to you." Now the writer in the gospel of Luke tells us that Jesus told his disciples and his followers that he came to divide?

We look at our current social climate, our climate of division, and know that what's going on around us right now couldn't possibly be what Jesus had in mind. Jesus' purpose couldn't possibly be to inspire the radicals like the El Paso and Dayton shooters. Jesus' plan couldn't possibly be to inspire the Rhode Island prison guard to drive into a peaceful crowd of Jewish people who, in light of the Holocaust, were protesting "Never Again." Jesus' plan couldn't possibly be to inspire my burning rage almost daily as I read some of my family's posts on Facebook.

Or is it? Now, I'm not saying that authentic discipleship of Jesus would inspire the violence of those first two examples, but the division – that burning rage against injustice and exceptionalism – maybe this passage from Luke isn't the outlier that many of us might imagine that it is at first.

I've shared before that one of the simplest ways to approach a passage like this, a passage that seems to contradict our modern sensibilities about Jesus and who he is, is to ask who would hear this as Good News. Who would hear, "I came to divide mother against daughter and daughter against mother," and find that comforting? Who would find that liberating?

The first example that comes to mind is the person who's deeply loyal to family, but who by their faith is also deeply justice-minded. Imagine someone who is compelled by Jesus' love and compassion and inclusion, but whose family is all about upholding the status quo, someone whose family anthem was, "What would the neighbors say?" Imagine that person whose faith has inspired them on the side of justice, but whose family values are not rocking the boat. Imagine that person hearing Jesus say, "I came to divide."

In today's political climate there are families in which some people are following Jesus' lead and advocating for the poor and the vulnerable. While some people in those same families are resisting that call to justice asking, "Why should I have to take care of them?" In a family situation like that, I can see Jesus saying, "I came to bring division." If there's a way that you are being called to be more like Jesus and your friends and family are holding you back, I think this passage is for you.

Another person who comes 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 gay community is that many stay closeted because of not wanting to make waves, not wanting to upset the family, wanting to make sure that Dad or Grandpa or the neighbors aren't scandalized. But keeping secrets in order to appease people – even those we love – is not one of Jesus' central values.

What are Jesus' central values? I'll let you sit with that for a second, but I have a few that I know of: healing people who are not being served well by the current system; freeing people from laws that diminished; speaking truth to power, especially when that power is 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 about themselves. It might also give some comfort to those who have come out and whose families or churches or communities weren't receptive. They can look at this passage and say Jesus said that this might happen. And I hope that the fact that Jesus said this might happen, even though it's hard to lose your family, might bring some hope and some comfort, and that this church can be your family now. 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 trying to recover. There is an unfortunate dynamic within human systems to resist change. One of my former church moderators said all the time 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. At every step, usually subconsciously, families and friends often sabotage efforts at recovery. This is often due to the reality or perception that if one person in the system changes, I'm going to have to change as well. Their recovery is going to change things for me, too. And so to the person who's 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 that we hold most dear – is the freedom that God is giving us.

All of this ties together with our passage from the Letter to the Hebrews today. Susan read of numerous heroes of the faith, people who triumphed against all odds because they had faith on their sides. But then the passage turns. After naming numerous heroes who

triumphed, we're told of people of faith who died exercising their faith: people who were stoned to death, sawed in two, killed by the sword, and more.

The last example that Hebrews gives is of Jesus who, it says, "endured the cross disregarding its shame." The way I read this passage from Hebrews connecting with Jesus telling us that Luke came that he would divide us is a reminder that living a life committed to things that Jesus is committed to, a life committed to justice and inclusion and healing and community and transforming systems, a life that fights greed, a life that liberates is often not going to be rewarded by the systems of this world. Yes, there are examples of heroes of the faith who triumphed, but our greatest example – Jesus himself – is someone who was executed by the state for standing up against the powers that be.

Friends, today's Gospel is harsh, don't get me wrong. It gives us a very different perspective on Jesus and the faith than we normally get, that vision of peace building and relationships. And our passage from Hebrews could feel rather bleak at face value as well. Nonetheless, while it is complicated, they are both still passages 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 greater 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 those people can find health here and hope here this week.

And so your assignment this week is, if this call to division resonates with you and your life right now, reread both of our scripture lessons from today (and I'll note that I asked Susan to extend the reading from what was written in your Bible to Hebrews 12:2, so remember that when you're reading your assignment go all the way to 12:2) reread these scripture lessons from today and allow them to comfort you. Allow their comfort to wash over you and convict you that you are indeed on the right and Godly track. And, if this division doesn't resonate with you where you are right now, there is someone in your life for whom it does resonate. Find the courage to share this Good News with them, that division can be a good thing. It can be Godly, if it sets you free. Alleluia and Amen.

Rev. Bridget Flad Daniels
Union Congregational United Church of Christ
Green Bay, Wisconsin
Hebrews 11:29-34; Luke 12:49-56
August 18, 2019