

Divided By Faith ???

Luke 12:49-56; Hebrews 11:29-12:2

Faith United Church of Christ, Richmond Heights, OH
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"Gentle Jesus, meek and mild ... look upon a little child ..." That is definitely NOT a hymn that would resonate with today's gospel reading! In the Lukan passage, Jesus said, "I came to bring fire to the earth ... Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather divisions!" Divisive talk and actions from Jesus seem to pop up a lot in the gospels, for example, when Jesus preached in the synagogue in Nazareth. At first, his hometown crowd was proud of him speaking about bringing good news to the poor, the incarcerated, the disabled and the oppressed. But then Jesus intentionally provoked them and pointed out how they actually ignored the prophetic truth. By then, they were outraged, tried to drive him out of town and hurled him off the cliff.

Today's text has one of those we call "hard sayings of Jesus."

Things that are hard to swallow and difficult to listen to, even if they seem to come from one whom Christians has committed to follow.

Especially in my Chinese culture where filial piety is a paramount social value, these hard sayings of Jesus: father against son, son against father, mother against daughter, daughter against mother, have been a stumbling block in evangelism. So much so that Christianity was seen as anti-Chinese in the popular imagination in the early 1900s. And, it did not help the white missionaries who came along with the Western colonial powers, and were popularly considered as the white devils.

Division is indeed a disturbing word. God knows that we already have enough things that divide us - politics, nationalism, ethnicity, economic status, social standing, educational level, religion, cultural issues and so on. So, does Jesus fit into what we nowadays may label someone as having a divisive personality? You know ... disruptive, unsettling, alienating, troublesome, controversial, contentious, causing

or tending to cause disagreement or dissension? Does Jesus really fit into that box? that caricature?

It seems that the divisiveness suggest in this text is not so much about the personal character of Jesus, as it is about the demanding nature of his call. With his words about bringing not peace but division, Jesus was telling his disciples about the true meaning of following him. The call of Jesus, to his disciples then, and to us today, demanded and still demands some significant decisions about the priorities in one's life and the realities one choose to see. The discipleship of bringing good news to the poor, the incarcerated, the blind and the oppressed, as Jesus does, has its own cost and joy. Jesus still calls us to divide ourselves from and stand against those societal values that build up the self at the expense of others and turn a blind eye to the plight of the disadvantaged. Sometimes the divisive part of Jesus' call may be quite specific and personally tailored to our life. Let me just give one example, shall I say, that is far from black and white.

My current call to ministry in the national setting of UCC is in the area of racial justice. One aspect of that ministry is to resource how local churches can engage where racial inequities show up today in 2013 in their own community in institutions, policies and practices. Racism does not stand still, just because 50 years ago the official racial discrimination in laws, policies and practices began to crumble. Someone says that race, though it is no biological basis (not even in DNA), is like technology that evolves with the times, mutating in its forms, and adapts in ways that are less visible and can even feel normal.

Now, it is not only people of color who are passionate about the fight against racial inequality, many of my white friends are just as passionate about racial reconciliation too. And from my white friend, I have heard how difficult it is to talk about race in their white families. This is particularly the case with relatives that are not the kind of hateful racists that they have to face down in their social activism. No, their relatives are good-hearted, family-loving, church-going,

community-oriented folks like themselves, who believe the principle of treating everyone equal.

The difference between them resides in the picture of inequality they perceive. With regard to our social disparities, their relatives cannot find the racist individuals with their discriminatory intent to belittle and to harm, only the poster child - persons of color that reinforces the stereotypes. On the other hand, my white friends find the disproportional impact on communities of color in these social disparities. It shows up where institutional inequities in public education, housing, criminal justice systems, converge to limit opportunities and undermine justice due to everyone.

Where is the divisiveness here when it comes to the call of Jesus in this specific situation, you ask? Isn't this just an honest difference in opinion and perspective our social problems? Well, if only this is just a theoretical matter of "agreeing to disagree." The heart of the matter here is the call of Jesus to make a difference in the everyday lives of the poor, the incarcerated, the disabled and the oppressed.

The divided reality perceived by my white friends and their relatives determine the solution to human predicament they see. Ultimately, it determines the cost of discipleship with which they may be willing to respond.

August the 28th, ten days from today, marks the 50th anniversary of the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom in 1963, an important turning point for the Civil Rights Movement, and Dr. King's "I Have A Dream" speech. I belong to those generations that were born or have migrated since then, and have benefited from the black-led Civil Rights Movement. The ending of bans on interracial marriage. The voting rights protections for language minority groups. The immigration and nationality act that ended racist immigration bans that once excluded Latin Americans, Asians, and Africans from immigrating to the U.S. Great strides have been made toward eliminating the legacies of racism in destructive laws, policies, and practices in the last fifty years, but "the path toward racial equality has been uneven; racial and ethnic discrimination still persists." We still have a long way to go.

The letter to the Hebrews reminds us that we are surrounded by a cloud of witnesses in this rally of faith in God, for all children of the Creator, so that all can be completed in joy. We are not the only generation that has to run with perseverance this rally of bringing the good news to the poor, the incarcerated, the disabled and the oppressed. The book of Hebrews speaks of faith as a matter of living in the midst of the world as it is, in all its brokenness, by an emphasis upon acts that are life-giving and life sustaining, for all. In the end, we lean in to Jesus for that peace that he promised in John 14:27. Not peace as the world understands, when we withdraw to live a comfortable existence where struggle and discord are absent. Instead, the peace of God is the presence of love - that magnetic center of calm amidst the storms of life and the rally for God's justice on earth.