

“Whiplash”

Luke 12: 49ff
August 19, 2001
James R. Gorman

There are certain teachings of Jesus that will give you whiplash if you're not careful. And those contained in today's Gospel lesson are among them. Jesus meek and mild becomes a warrior speaking words that come unexpectedly and strangely to our ears.

“Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the Earth? No, I tell you, but rather division!”

*I will set father against son
and son against father;
mother against daughter
and daughter against mother.*

And then, as if that's not carrying the animosity far enough he adds:

*Mother-in-law against daughter-in-law
and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law!*

What Jesus says here isn't exactly what we normally think of as good news! What's even more remarkable is that now you expect me to bring some light to this text, and make it intelligible. One scholar labels this section of Luke "The enigma of Jesus' mission." Enigma indeed! Enigma wrapped inside a mystery.

What do we make of these rather harsh words from our Prince of Peace? What do we make of these words from the mouth of the one born on the night when the angels sang, according to this very Gospel of Luke: “Glory to God in the highest and on earth, peace among people of good will.”

And yet I suspect that for some of us, this passage strikes a profound if deeply sad note. There aren't very many families where there is no division. Sometimes it is out in the open, but in other cases it is carefully plastered over and ignored. Painful stories not to be repeated until, sometimes, generations later.

I just heard of a family member in my own family, a distant cousin, who hasn't spoken to his daughter in so long that he didn't recognize her when he saw her at a family gathering. “Who is that young lady over by the punch bowl?” he asked the fellow next to him. “That's your daughter, Eugene,” his cousin told him. We're not sure whether Eugene really didn't recognize his daughter or he was just being unforgivably sarcastic.

And perhaps that is how we begin to make sense of Jesus' words. He is warning us that such division and discord happens in families, and Christians are not immune from it.

Pop psychology has taught us that families are often "dysfunctional"—indeed, it may well be that if we listen to all the psychologists, we'd discover that every family is dysfunctional, and no one is normal! But this shouldn't really be a surprise to us; we confess our brokenness every week. Our Scriptures make the same point. The Old Testament is almost painfully honest in portraying people of faith who nonetheless make mistakes and have terrible conflicts within their families. From Cain and Abel to Joseph and his brothers, the book of Genesis is the story of one dysfunctional family after another being given the responsibility to pass on the story of God nonetheless.

But division in a family has a more immediate cause, and that is that every individual is given by God the opportunity to make choices. We don't always choose wisely, and we certainly don't always choose the same thing. Jesus' words here underscore that for us, and they remind us that we are responsible for our own choices, but not for anyone else's.

That's sometimes a hard reality, especially for parents. We'd like our children to make the same choices we have made, to choose the same values, the same commitments. Sometimes they do, sometimes they don't—but it is entirely out of our hands. This week I read a fascinating article by a very articulate layman, reflecting on what he wishes he had done differently in raising his children. His children are all fine, successful, apparently happy people, he said, but despite his best efforts he did not seem to have transmitted his own passionate faith in Christ to them. So at this very deep level of life, he feels a kind of division, a kind of sadness.

Now I don't know if his children would have made other choices if he had done things differently; often the choices people make about the most important things in life are seemingly unrelated to what anyone else has tried to teach them or instill in them. That's just reality. And truth be told, the biggest single cause of family strife is probably the refusal or inability to accept the fact that another family member makes a different choice.

Perhaps what Jesus is saying here is that we need to accept the reality of different choices. We can't live anyone's life but our own.

Perhaps we also need to say that division is not always a bad thing. Sometimes it can be healthy. The classic example of this is the way we deal with alcoholism. There is a tendency, when a loved one is an alcoholic, to try to rescue that person. The wife will call the boss and say her husband is sick, when in fact he is recovering from a long night of alcohol abuse.

So often there is a conspiracy of silence; everyone knows this family member has a problem, but no one will talk about it. We have lots of modern words to describe this phenomenon: denial, enabling, codependency. The experts say that such behavior only

encourages and enables the alcoholic to continue to drink. Sometimes the only way to break the cycle is to step back and say, "No more. If you choose to drink, that is your choice, but I won't cover for you any more." It doesn't mean that you stop loving the person; it means that you practice what counselors often call "tough love."

The tough part of love is the issue of "speaking truth in love." If you speak the truth without love you will alienate. If you speak only love without speaking the hard truth, you enable people to continue doing destructive things. The race to be run involves speaking the truth in love.

Our task in all of this is to be faithful. If we cannot make choices for others, we must constantly make them for ourselves. Jesus talks about his baptism, "and what stress I am under," he says, "until it is completed." He means that he must pay close attention to his own faithfulness to his task. The writer to the Hebrews has a similar viewpoint. "Run with perseverance," he says. Be faithful.

When Jesus talks about division in families, he is not suggesting that we should just write off those whose choices separate them from us. Rather, we must continue to be faithful ourselves, loving them, praying for them, never losing hope.

I read a dramatic story about a boy born forty years ago in communist China to Christian parents. His parents did their best to raise their children in the faith, but at school they would be taught something radically different. They were taught to despise their own parents, and soon they did.

The father in this family was imprisoned because he would not renounce his faith. When he was released after several years, he was in many respects a broken man, yet his faith in Christ was intact. The son, who despised his father, after many years had a change of heart, and realized that the promises of Chairman Mao were empty. He writes:

"I dragged home. Long hair, dirty, smelling, and strangling in depression.... Nervously I slipped inside and sat on the sofa in my parents' cramped, dingy apartment.... How long I sat there with my head in my hands, I don't know.

Finally I heard my father's footsteps, heard him sit across from me. I couldn't look up. I couldn't speak. He had every right to cast me aside. After an eternity, I felt his hand on my shoulder. When he spoke, his voice held no hint of the years he'd waited...for me to come back...and for the truth to win. 'Welcome home, son.' "

Be faithful. Keep loving. Keep hoping, praying. Realize that Jesus, in talking about division in families, is not speaking so much about judgment as about the reality of our human state. But what he says here in Luke 12 is not the last word, or the only word.

The truly good news is that he has come to reconcile those who are divided, and to bring light to those who sit in darkness. Jeremiah reminds us that he is a God who is near, who fills heaven and earth. With him the future is ever open. With him, there is always hope. He brings division, yes, but beyond the division he breaks down walls and draws us to himself. It is an enigma, wrapped inside a mystery. We do not understand it. But we are told that the peace and the joy we have been promised, we will receive. And we are urged to run with perseverance, never to lose heart.

+++

My thanks to Pastor Richard Johnson for the starting point and some of the illustrative content for this sermon.