

Providence Presbyterian Church  
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Luke 12: 49-56 and Jeremiah 23: 23-29

Do we have any peace-keepers in the room? By that I mean, are you the one that wants everyone to get along, that tries to help family patch things up? Do you take the responsibility of making sure the family is getting together? Do you ask people to hold their opinions so that others don't get upset, therefore keeping the rabble-rousers in check? Have you ever lost sleep over a conflict that you don't know how to resolve?

And what about the non-peace keepers? How many of you couldn't care less about keeping everybody happy? Anybody? Well, after the service you all can apologize to the peace-makers for their hours of lost sleep you have caused them.

I had a professor in college. Rich Eckley. He behaved enough to keep his job for a few decades at a very conservative college. And yet, he would say things that stirred us conservative kids to think and to reconsider. And while he would not make a scene about things, we would learn things from him or about him in a non-chalant or indirect way. We learned he would take his son to downtown Buffalo and handout condoms to prostitutes. Now in conservative circles, there is always this concern and need to call out sin and to not condone sin, and Professor Eckley's actions could easily be seen to condone. But instead, it was a humble compassion that came through, and a desire to teach his son to be compassionate to those whose lives are quite different.

Jesus does not seem as careful to avoid conflict. Jesus probably wouldn't have lasted three decades at a conservative school. But like Professor Eckley, Jesus cares more about compassion and people than he does following traditional lines. Jesus doesn't seem to be the peace-keeper. It is not his desire to make sure everybody is happy, and he does not seem to agree with that old Young Life principle of being all things to all peoples. He seems to think that sometimes you must follow your calling. Sometimes you follow the thread of love and grace to where it seems to lead, you live out grace with conviction, and it may, as a result, cause division. Jesus emphasizes this, that he did not come to make all things comfortable and peaceable. He came to act in ways that will cause division, that some will follow and others resist, and this may divide even family.

Jesus regularly touches, entertains, or accepts the hospitality of people that causes division and controversy. And often, the peace-keepers ask him to stop, and to ask him to quiet and control his followers so that controversy is not created.

Now for the peace-keepers in the room, I wonder if Jesus' words stimulate a little anxiety. Do these words strike you uncomfortably? Family bonds torn asunder, two divided against three and three against two. A father against a son. A daughter against mother, a daughter-in-law against a mother-in-law. These words are particularly threatening to those in Jesus' cultural setting who value family, and community and nation far above individuality.

In Jesus' cultural context, there is a high value on community, tradition, conformity, and thus continuity and stability. I spoke not long ago about family systems theory. One of the main tenets is that of stasis, or homeostasis, that sense of maintaining a sense of peace and rolling along, and therefore tries to diffuse any disruptions to that stasis. For this reason, I find our poem to be a playful reflection of such things. In the poem, the mother is acting weird and making everybody uncomfortable, and so they can't take it anymore and host an intervention, the intervention designed to make her return to her role in the family, and to the familiar patterns, and therefore remove the discomfort for everyone else. They want to restore order and stasis. But unlike someone whose well-being is at stake, and the intervention is staged to help them confront self-destructive habits or patterns, here the mother has found forgiveness and soft-heartedness and a self-sacrificial generosity. And while redemptive for her, it is threatening to the patterns and balance for everyone else, and they demand she stop.

When Jesus starts reinterpreting the tradition; when he starts articulating his ministry and mission. When Jesus starts touching lepers, and listening to the stories of prostitutes, and touching unclean women, and teaching these women, and sharing meals with Rome-sympathizing tax collectors. This will make many uncomfortable, and they will wish for him to stop.

For when Jesus reaches out his hand, and he touches a leper or the woman, or goes to eat at the house of the tax collector, everyone notices and focuses on the barrier Jesus has crossed. These are moves that break norms, that invite reaction, that stir up unrest. These are problematic moves in Jesus' culture. He is liable to be accused of "stirring up" trouble. Because he is

threatening patterns and norms. But he is only living out his convictions of grace and love, of forgiveness and mercy.

You see that is the trick with the desire for everyone to get along and be happy. These balances, these moments of everybody being "at peace" require the silencing of some voices. Like in the poem, we ask them to go silent. And the mother decides to accept this silence, to accept some level of inequality or injustice, all to keep conflict at bay. Jesus refuses to do these things, and he refuses to tell people to quiet down or accept inequality of injustice just for the sake of maintaining stasis, maintaining the *status quo*.

Hence where the division comes; where the conflict arises, is when your call or your conviction upsets the equilibrium. Like a mother finding a new pattern in her fifties. Like Rosa Parks sitting in the front seat of the bus. Like a family member coming home and saying, "I am gay." Like Jesus speaking to a bunch of Rome-haters, to love your enemies. It all stirs up controversy, it may want us to ask these people to just to comply with the way things have always been. But controversy that might serve us well, to move beyond accepted patterns, patterns that do not fully reflect God's love and purposes in this world, and to imagine what Jesus' actions would be in that moment.

This all makes me think of the novel set in the '60s in Jackson, Mississippi, *the Help*. The help are the black women who work days in white women's homes. It is about these ladies who ride the bus in from their part of town, to go to work as maids in white homes. It is about two separate worlds which connect only in these small ways; that a black woman can be in a house full of white women every day, but not be spoken to, but not be permitted to use the same bathroom. A balance exists. A peace built on specific ways of being and seeing others, and relies on black women accepting their roles and indignities.

But a child raised by a caring woman may come to see things differently, may not learn to treat her as something other the loving mothering figure who reared her. *The Help* tells of the bond which forms between a child, and the maid who cares for her. And this young girl comes to know this woman not just as the black maid who works in her parents' house. She comes to know her as Constantine. She doesn't see black. And what happens to a system of separation if the next generation does not preserve it, does see others in the same way, let alone if they refuse to accept it and act in ways that transgress those accepted boundaries, even as Jesus did?

Jesus' propensity to violate normal boundaries and to view and treat all as both children of God and of potential participants in the kingdom of God that he comes proclaiming; this propensity insights trouble, invites a reaction. And when the powers at be put on the pressure, and raise concerns, and try to put to rest such troublesome actions, others will have a choice, to turn back, or to follow Jesus despite the conflict.

“Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division! <sup>52</sup> From now on five in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three.”

The Jeremiah reading contains an indictment against prophets who do not actually speak for the Lord. They say, "all is good," "keep the balance," "continue as usual," "all is good," when the Lord is trying to confront and steer differently. So the real prophet, like Jeremiah, speaks a word that is unpopular and easily side-lined, especially when other prophets offer a more comforting word, though untrue, though not from the Lord.

Now it is interesting to read and consider these passages in our societal moment. The notion of a family divided against itself, or a community or a nation, is all too familiar, and viscerally so. Just bring up politics amidst mixed party affiliations. We are a people divided against ourselves, and it does not take much effort or creativity to create controversy. Any hack can do it.

In such a time when division is easy and in vogue, how do we distinguish such fashionable outrage from actually following Christ? You see, that is the division Jesus is talking about, the reaction that comes when we follow Christ in ways that do not conform to the lines and norms and expectations of a culture.

So, in a culture accustomed to divisiveness, and where we are tempted to stoke the fires now and then, we should remember how controversy began for Jesus. The impulse to touch the leper who had not felt human touch in forever. To listen to the painful stories of women, and to teach them. To see hope in the eyes of the tax-collector, who had become despised by his own people. To see Gentiles as heirs of the promise also. You see, this is the example for us, the kind of controversy that we might stir or welcome when someone else stirs it.

And furthermore, we are called to be willing to be a community that is willing to change in order to make room for people, to adjust our expectations rather than ask others to quiet down and stop rocking the boat. To be the family that adapts around a mother learning grace and generosity in her fifties, rather than instructing her to stop.

It makes me wonder if and how I embody the call to follow Christ. How do I live it? How has the gospel shaped me in the ways I see, talk about, and relate to the world around me? And does my way of being in the world actually cause trouble at all?

So, what if we set aside the voicing of canned arguments that are the basis of our societal divisions, and relied only on the divisions that come from our lived out priorities, would our lives actually cause controversy? And are we willing to adapt our patterns to accommodate kingdom-related controversy?

How are you living out the call to follow Christ? How are you living out the kingdom? Does it cause anyone to look at you strange? Does it cause anybody to say, fall in line, stop doing that?

<sup>49</sup> “I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! <sup>50</sup> I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what stress I am under until it is completed! <sup>51</sup> Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division! <sup>52</sup> From now on five in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three; <sup>53</sup> they will be divided:

father against son  
and son against father,  
mother against daughter  
and daughter against mother,  
mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law  
and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law.”

*Interpreting the Time*  
(Mt 16.1—4)

<sup>54</sup> He also said to the crowds, “When you see a cloud rising in the west, you immediately say, ‘It is going to rain’; and so it happens. <sup>55</sup> And when you see the south wind blowing, you say, ‘There will be scorching heat’; and it happens. <sup>56</sup> You hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present time?

Jeremiah 23: 23-29

<sup>23</sup> Am I a God near by, says the LORD, and not a God far off? <sup>24</sup> Who can hide in secret places so that I cannot see them? says the LORD. Do I not fill heaven and earth? says the LORD. <sup>25</sup> I have heard what the prophets have said who prophesy lies in my name, saying, “I have dreamed, I have dreamed!” <sup>26</sup> How long? Will the hearts of the prophets ever turn back—those who prophesy lies, and who prophesy the deceit of their own heart? <sup>27</sup> They plan to make my people forget my name by their dreams that they tell one another, just as their ancestors forgot my name for Baal. <sup>28</sup> Let the prophet who has a dream tell the dream, but let the one who has my word speak my word faithfully. What has straw in common with wheat? says the LORD. <sup>29</sup> Is not my word like fire, says the LORD, and like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces?