

“A DIVISION OF OUR HOUSE”

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Isaiah 5:1-7; Luke 12:49-56

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We were sitting in what had become our usual section in the Hartford Civic Center and we had been listening to the business session for over an hour as reports were offered and resolutions were debated. Finally we witnessed a vote as “yeas” and “nays” held up their voting cards; and although the vote looked to be fairly close from where we were sitting, the Moderator of the Synod stated that “yeas” carried the vote, and thus we were on to the next resolution. But then, amid a growing rumble of voices from the floor of the Synod and from among those of us who were observing the session, we saw her, in her bright yellow shirt, headed toward the microphone. She had risen from a seat from within the Iowa delegation, and as she followed a rather circuitous route to the microphone the rumble and the rustle grew. When she was recognized by the Moderator as she stood at the microphone designated for procedural actions many of us knew what was coming: she called for a division of the house, a procedural motion that required a hand count be taken and, thus, the tellers were deployed throughout the floor of the Synod and votes were tallied on a delegation by delegation basis. As we sat in section 221 observing the spectacle of the voting process at General Synod, we watched as the house was carefully divided into “yeas” and “nays” until an exact tabulation of the votes was known. As several of us explained what was happening to those sitting around us, I wondered if such diligent counting of votes was a good thing for the church to be doing. Although I had strong feelings about many of the issues before the Synod, I was a little uncomfortable with dividing the church into winners and losers on such heart-felt issues. After nearly 20 minutes the “yeas” carried the vote by a margin of 20 or so votes; then we were on to the next resolution—as a working body, but as a divided house. Our Synod experience, where we witnessed debate on Physician Aid in Dying, immigration policy, the possibility of re-visiting the issue of marriage equality, and even how the composition of Synod should be apportioned in the future called us to think about our stands and beliefs on these issues. For our delegates, this was more than an intellectual exercise since they were required to stake out a position so that a count could be taken and our house divided.

From our experience at Synod to our scripture lesson today, we often find our house divided. Before we get to the question of a divided house, our text begins with Jesus saying, “I came to bring fire to the earth and how I wish it was already kindled! I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what stress I am under until it is completed!” This is an allusion to John the Baptist’s promise that Jesus will baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire. This allusion is deeply important, for as upsetting as the later verses may be, we must understand the context from which Jesus comes if we are to understand his later words. We must remember to whom Jesus was speaking, and we must think about the gospel writer’s perspective as we hear these words.

“This passage comes in the middle of a larger section that emphasizes watchfulness, readiness, and faithful discipleship. The surrounding sections call upon servants to be watchful, tell servants to work faithfully in anticipation of the master’s return, include a warning from Jesus that ‘unless you repent you will all perish,’ and has a barren fig tree being cut down due to lack of production.”¹ Each of these sections reminds us about the essence of Jesus and his divine

mission and they are to be understood within the context of Luke's vision of Jesus as the one who has come to fulfill the prophesy of the Hebrew prophets. Jesus has come to bring a life-changing baptism and to change the people of God.

The family has always been a deeply important unit, but during the time of Jesus it could be argued its importance was at a zenith because the legal structures and social strata were completely based upon the family. Children were deeply important in order for the work of the family to be done (more children = more acres that could be worked, more nets that could be used for fishing, or more sheep that could be tended); and when it came time for property to be divided the birth order and gender of the heirs set the rules for inheritance. In light of the importance of family during biblical times, Jesus' announcement that he comes to divide the family seems especially striking and even dangerous. However, in reading about this passage there are scholars who believe that this passage is perhaps more a Lucan device than it is a statement from Jesus. If this passage provides insight into who Luke was and the state of the early church, we can imagine Luke was feeling that the church was under siege from those around them and he was desperate to give them strength in the face of a world that opposes them and would bring great suffering on this new sect. Luke's depiction of Jesus, then, is of one who announces that division is to be expected because not everyone is ready to hear the message that he brings. Witnessing a father pitted against son and daughter against mother is clearly what the early church was experiencing as parents and children differed on their response to Jesus—could they leave the faith they had known to join this new sect which followed the teachings of Jesus? Could they take their family with them? Would this new church become a family?

All of the context questions are interesting and important to debate, and I do think that perhaps we are witnessing the concerns of the early church bleed into Luke's writing. However, what I find most interesting about this passage is my own gut reaction to two sentences: "Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division!" Every time I read these sentences I find myself halting and really wondering if I am in the right place. Did I really just read that that one who is called the 'Prince of Peace' is denying this call and instead announcing that he has come to sow division in the ranks? I want, and dare say I need, Jesus to be the one who proclaims peace because there is so much war, hatred, and division in our the world that if we take the peace-maker Jesus away from that long ago world I don't know how I (or we) can survive.

However, I wonder if in our haste to promote peace in a world that so desperately needs a peace-maker we haven't robbed Jesus of some of his prophetic power and turned him into a Mister Rogers "speak in soft-tones-don't offend anyone" caricature, rather than letting him be the disturbing and revolutionary presence that his "I bring division" statement seems to promote. This is the man who threw the money changers out of the temple—right? This is the man who seemed to go out of his way to provoke the religious leaders of his day—right? Isn't this the same guy who healed when he wasn't supposed to, who called tax collectors to be in his inner circle, who spoke of a new covenant? How is it then that we have somehow decided we should make him over into the sedate and robed guy waving the peace sign?

Perhaps an even more damning question is, "Why is it that we have so often chosen to follow the radical and revolutionary prophet we call Jesus the Christ in the calm, measured, and safe and sedate ways that we do? The division that Jesus spoke of creating was not division for the sake

of division, but rather a recognition that there would be fallout as people chose to follow the new way he was offering and that the fallout would be felt by many as division. In this passage, Jesus is calling upon his early followers to place themselves at risk by following him—to risk being cut off from those they love if they are not willing to reach for the kingdom of God of which Jesus is inviting them to partake. This passage still has the same call imbedded in it 2000 years later as we are invited to risk following Jesus, to risk causing a commotion, to risk altering the world in dramatic ways. This passage isn't about sitting in our pews and committing ourselves to follow Jesus. This isn't a passage about our own spiritual journey, as nice as that might be. Instead, this is a passage that requires us to be active and to embrace the fact that wherever Jesus went he seemed to cause a commotion, a crisis, a disturbance. It begs the question, "Why aren't we causing more of a disturbance as we live out our faith?"

In some places it is happening: Marian Wright Edelman and the Children's Defense Fund, with the backing of many church folks, have been disturbing people of late to make sure that all our children have health care. The United Church of Christ has launched a faith-based petition drive to seek to bring our troops home and end the atrocities of this war. People are speaking out because devastation, ruin, and displacement are still rampant nearly two years after the hurricanes devastated the Gulf Coast. People are speaking out and disturbing the peace because Oregon has one of the highest child poverty rates. People are speaking out because countless numbers will die today in Darfur and too few people seem to care. People are disturbing the peace because AIDS still devastates our world and is an epidemic in Africa. Church people are disturbing the peace because CEO salaries continue to grow, but actual wages for hourly workers fail to keep pace with the rising cost of fuel and food.

As I read this lesson, it is past the time when we should be debating what Jesus might have meant and whether the Prince of Peace has been lost in this passage. It is time to follow Jesus into uncomfortable places, into places of advocacy, into faithful places where we might actually disagree. Our house is and should be divided; we should be talking, debating, and working as we follow Jesus toward a world that is uncomfortable and disturbed until everyone is fed, clothed, and safe. Jesus the divider wants nothing less. Our work is before us...
Thanks be to God. Amen

¹ Donovan, Richard., <http://www.lectionary.org/EXEG-English/NT/ENT03-Luke/Luke%2012.49-56.htm>