

Jesus Brings Division?

Rev. Thomas Orquiza-Renardo

The passage we read this morning is one that I've always found particularly troubling. It's not that Jesus' words are confusing; Jesus, more or less, made a habit of painting dramatic or counter-cultural word pictures. But the picture Jesus paints in today's passage is... well, terrifying.

Let's take a quick look at the passage again. Right off the bat, in verse 49, Jesus starts in with the image of fire. "I have come to bring fire on the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled!" As if that's not enough, Jesus briefly makes a coded comment about his crucifixion, then goes on to talk about how he hasn't come to bring peace at all. He's come to bring division. When this story is told in the Gospel of Matthew, chapter 10, verse 34, it says Jesus doesn't bring peace, but a sword. Moving on to verse 52, Jesus describes a new normal. "From now on," he says, "There will be five in one family divided against each other..."

Now I don't know about you, but when I start reading about how Jesus has come to divide the world instead of uniting it, that makes me anxious. It fills me with trepidation. It makes me wonder if I really understand Christianity at all. Why would Jesus, the Messiah, the Savior of the world, the Holy Son of God, God in flesh come down to earth, tell us he's here to divide us? Why would the ever-loving, ever-compassionate, ever-forgiving Jesus tell us he wants to see the world burn?

Is this a characteristic of God coming out in Jesus that we more readily associate with the Old Testament? We've all read passages in the Old Testament that tell of God being fed up with Israel. Those same passages tell of how, if Israel doesn't right itself, devastation would befall the land. Sometimes it's a natural disaster like a drought. Often times, it's war. In the worst cases, it's exile and erasure by assimilation.

Isaiah 5:1-7 is one of these passages. These verses are known as "The Song of the Vineyard". In this passage, God sings a song to the people of Judah about a vineyard planted in love and dedication with vines that promised good fruit. The vineyard was even complete with a watchtower and a winepress. But even though the vineyard was watched over and well cared for, the vines only grew wild fruit, no good for anything. So, in the song God tears down the hedge and the wall around the vineyard, opening it up to be trampled and destroyed. Weeds will be allowed to grow rampant and the sky will be closed off so no rain will fall.

The imagery is of something that was designed to be so beautiful and filled with the best the earth has to offer, becoming something now overgrown, infested, and at the utter brink of being unredeemable. At the end, God reveals the nation of Israel to be the vineyard and the people of Judah to be the choice vines that grew only wild, unusable grapes. God wanted from the people of Judah to see fruits of justice and righteousness. All God witnessed was the sour fruits of bloodshed. All God heard were cries of distress.

Could this be what Jesus is getting on about? Is Jesus fed up with the world and is warning his followers of calamity about to befall the nation of Israel...yet again? That doesn't sound like the Jesus we hear told about in the rest of scripture. Why would Jesus want the world to be on fire and

people be divided? I mean, what happened to the angel proclamation of “peace on earth, good will toward humankind”? What happened to the beatitudes; blessed are the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, the persecuted, and those insulted for following Christ? What happened to Matthew 12:25 where it states, “every city or household divided against itself will not stand”? What happened to John 3:16; “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life”?

Wait... What was that?

Maybe we need to take a closer look at what those scriptures are saying. Each of those scriptures calls out important pieces of what it means to follow Christ. The angel proclamation is pointing toward the goal. Jesus comes that we will know peace and have life abundantly. It’s a goal worthy of seeking after and committing to the work required to make it happen. The beatitudes all point to who we should either be caring for or working to be. We should be walking with those who are poor in spirit. We should be standing up for those who are persecuted, we should hunger and thirst for righteousness, we should be meek and merciful and pure in heart and peacemakers. We, as believers in Christ, should stand united as one; not be fighting against one another. We all believe and hope in Christ. We know his love and his sacrifice. We know the cost of salvation was his life. We know by Jesus’ resurrection, the authority he has over death. We know what it’s all about; the hope, the love, the joy, the peace, the victory over all the evil in Creation!

So why fire and division?

Because such levels of commitment and devotion bring with it trial and struggle. Jesus came not to bring peace, but redemption. The work of redemption is never easy. It always means letting something go. It means cutting out those pieces of our lives, even those people, preventing us from being the best versions of ourselves. You cannot live as a disciple of Christ and still live as who you once were. A house divided will not stand.

Jesus knows what he is asking us to do. Jesus knows the struggle putting us on such a road will put us through. But Jesus also knows what awaits us on the other side of that struggle and he will be with us the whole way through. Jesus will walk with us through the fire. It’s up to us which fire we are walking through.

You see fire can be so many things. Fire can warm us, and fire can burn us. Fire can be used to cook our food so it’s safe to eat, and fire can consume our homes leaving us out in the cold. Fire can light our way home or devastate all in its path. I prefer to look at it this way. Fire can forge metal into something unbreakable and it can refine silver to the point you can see the refiner’s reflection.

If this were all that Jesus said in the passage this morning, it would be case closed. Walk through the fire with Jesus and don’t be afraid of letting go of the bad influences in your life even if they cause you pain. The hurt will heal, and you’ll be better for it.

But that’s not all Jesus said. Jesus went on in the Gospel reading to talk about signs of the time. Jesus is warning folks about the coming judgment and telling them to open their eyes and pay

attention. Jesus mentions how everyone knew a cloud in the west from the Mediterranean Sea meant rain, and a wind from the south meant scorching heat. If they can read the weather so easily why is it so hard to see what's happening around them? Why was it so hard for people to hear the message of repentance and see, with Jesus, the kingdom was at hand?

With this, the question of division is no longer just one of commitment. It also becomes a question of focus; of faith. Yes, live your life committed to Christ. Praise Jesus for what he's done for you by his sacrifice and resurrection. Go to church, pray, read scripture, give your offering, be a good person. Do all of this... and more.

The division Jesus is talking about in the scripture goes deeper than the one between believer and unbeliever. It's a question of how far we're willing to go. How deep are we willing to dive into this Christian devotion.? Are we only willing to work for our own redemption? Or are we in it for the long haul? Are we willing to continue the work of redemption out into the world?

In "The Song of the Vineyard" from Isaiah, the problem was one of justice and righteousness. The people were not taking care of each other. Some may have been following the law and sacrificing for their own gain. But they were not following the Spirit. People were going unheard and unfed, unsheltered and unloved. The love of God could not be found in the hearts of the chosen people. God calls us to more.

Matthew 25 tells us how the Son of Man will separate us like sheep being separated from goats. It talks about how we live as Christians doing good in the name of Christ, or simply lived doing no good but for ourselves. Jesus calls us to do more.

"Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me" (Matthew 25:34-36).

In Revelation, chapters one through three, the risen, ascended, and glorified Jesus has John send letters to each of the seven churches. The last of these churches is the church in Laodicea. Jesus tells the church they are neither cold nor hot. He tells them since they are lukewarm, he's about to spit them out. Because they are content in their prosperity they were not acting as the church, but simply maintaining where they were. Jesus calls us to do more.

In our world today there are so many different messages advertised as being from Christ. There are messages of white supremacy. There are messages of blind nationalism. There are messages of prosperity over charity. There are messages of self-indulgence. There are messages of refusing people a seat at Christ's table for who they are or who they love. There are messages of apathy, of privilege over poverty, of wealth and power over love and human dignity. All of these are messages put out in the name of Christ. God in Christ calls us to more and to better.

This is where faith comes in. Hebrews is a letter written to the Hebrew Christians of the early church who were under constant persecution for their belief and devotion to Christ. They had to contend with ridicule, insults, and violence from their own Hebrew brothers and sisters. These

would have been families and former friends they had known all their lives, now turned against them for the hope they found in Jesus. They would have also had to navigate the various ideas that would pop up about who Jesus was and in what ways was he divine; in what ways was he human? Was he spirit or was he flesh? Was he born as God come down, or did God take him over at the baptism? Was he from the same god we see in the Old Testament, or was he from a “better god” who wanted to save us from the god of the Old Testament?

In the 11th chapter, the author starts telling of all the forefathers in the faith who stayed focused on what was right and what was of God. He tells how faith brought the people through the waters of the Red Sea, how faith brought the walls of Jericho down, how faith saved Rahab the prostitute. He mentions Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel and the prophets of Israel, all of whom by faith were able to do mighty things to save Israel. He talked about how others suffered for the cause of remaining faithful to God, yet they remained focused on what was good and what was of God.

God called all of these folks to more than what the world wanted of them. They stayed true to God’s call on their life, even as it separated them out from those around them. Now as Hebrews 12 tells us, they surround us as a cloud of witnesses, to encouraging us to persevere in our Christian walk, not leaning to the left or to the right, but always focusing on “Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.”

God calls us to do more. God calls us not just to take that leap of faith into a renewed and changed life. God calls us to grow beyond our own redemption and seek redemption for the world. This is what divides the sheep from the goats. This is the division that Jesus brings. It’s that question of how far are we willing to dive? Are we content being lukewarm? I hope not, because Jesus is still calling us.

There is a whole world in need of redemption, and we are called to have a part in that work. We are called with so many others. People like those working in the Reconciling Ministries Network seeking to bring healing and reconciliation between the church and LGBTQ persons hurt by blind adherence to discriminatory doctrines. There are those like Katherine Parker our United Methodist Missionary to Nepal, who works with United Ministries Network, a multi-denominational effort to bring the love of Christ to the global world. And there’s also Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon, an organization of multiple faith communities working together for the betterment of God’s people.

In all of this, the pain of letting go, the process of healing, the looking beyond ourselves to the needs of the world, the sifting through the various messages the world gives us in the name of Christ... In all of it, there is one thing to remember. Stay focused on Jesus Christ. Listen to your heart of hearts; that place where Jesus lives within you, and hear his sweet voice. Know that Jesus walks with you and is there to guide you. Follow him with all your heart, mind, body, and soul, and everything else will fall into place.

In Jesus name, Amen.