

⁴⁹"I have come to bring fire on the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! ⁵⁰But I have a baptism to undergo, and how distressed I am until it is completed! ⁵¹Do you think I came to bring peace on earth? No, I tell you, but division. ⁵²From now on there will be five in one family divided against each other, three against two and two against three. ⁵³They will be divided, father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law."

⁵⁴He said to the crowd: "When you see a cloud rising in the west, immediately you say, 'It's going to rain,' and it does.

⁵⁵And when the south wind blows, you say, 'It's going to be hot,' and it is. ⁵⁶Hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of the earth and the sky. How is it that you don't know how to interpret this present time?"

Dezi Arnez said, "Lucy, you got some 'splainin to do." After reading this scripture, I say, "Jesus, you got some 'splainin to do." What is all this business about you coming to bring division and not peace? These are not the words of the Jesus with whom most of us have grown acquainted. What about those wonderful words from Isaiah that we read every Christmas Eve—"For unto us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace." (Isaiah 9:6) And then there's this other little bit from Isaiah, "And He will judge between the nations and will settle disputes for many peoples. They will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore." (Isaiah 2:4) That's all about peace. And then Jesus, you're the one who told your disciples, "Whatever house you enter, first say, 'Peace be to this house!'" If you came to bring division, why did you tell your disciples to bring peace? And don't forget what you said in John's gospel, "I have said this to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world." (John 16:33) Well, Jesus, you're the one giving us tribulation. But the kicker to me is—how could you say you came to bring division and then, at another time, offer us these most beautiful and comforting words, "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid."

Well Jesus, if you do not want our hearts to be troubled and if you do not want us to be afraid then why in heaven's name did you say "Do you think I came to bring peace on earth? No, I tell you, but division." Division is troubling and it makes us afraid. Jesus, you've got some 'splainin' to do! Why will father be against son and son against father and mother against daughter and daughter against mother and so on and so forth?!?!

And in a way, Jesus does go on to do some "splainin"--"When you see a cloud rising in the west, immediately you say, 'It's going to rain,' and it does. ⁵⁵And when the south wind blows, you say, 'It's going to be hot,' and it is. ⁵⁶Hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of the earth and the sky. How is it that you don't know how to interpret this present time?" Jesus admonishes his listeners for being masters of the obvious—a hot wind comes from the south and they say it's going to be hot. A storm cloud gathers in the west and they say it's going to rain. They are, in essence, making small talk. No one's going to argue about the likelihood of rain when a storm cloud is gathering above. And yet, if the people were talking about what really matters, if they were discussing matters of the kingdom of God, then there would be division. But it takes a certain level of courage and honesty to have the "real" conversations in life and in this passage, Jesus points out the inutility of small talk and the reality of what happens when his followers discuss what is truly important—there will be conflict and division—it's inevitable.

I like what Pastor Todd Weir, a minister from Poughkeepsie, New York has to say on the topic, "True peace seldom comes without a painful process of being honest about the real issues. Peace can only be built if there is truth, justice, equality and respect." Pastor Weir is talking about true peace, the kind of peace that it takes to get a lion to lie down with a lamb, the kind of peace that it takes to get soldier to beat a sword into a plow—it's not just a getting along kind of peace, it's not just a not rocking the boat kind of peace, it's not the insipid peace of social pleasantries. Getting along, not rocking the boat and social pleasantries are about keeping everyone in their place, avoiding change and maintaining the status quo. If there are things we know

about Jesus' ministry, it is that the first would be last and the last would be first—not that everyone would be kept in their place. Jesus' ministry is about the instability of a transient lifestyle in which you have only the sandals on your feet and the cloak on your back—not about the security and predictability that come with avoiding change. And Jesus was clear that the kingdom of God that was near—a kingdom in which the status quo means nothing and those who insist on preserving it are left behind. Yes, Jesus came to bring peace—but not peace as the world knew of it—peace as in an absence of war—rather, that peace that passes all understanding—a peace based on the standards of the kingdom of God, not the expectations of humankind.

The point here is that when we choose to follow Jesus, we are bound to experience tension and division—a tension and division that can be so intense that father turns against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother—not for the sake of division itself—but rather for God's sake. Jesus himself experienced this kind of painful division when he was forced to choose God over his family. God wanted him to go out into the world to proclaim the coming of God's kingdom while his family tried to shut him up and keep him at home. In the book of Mark we read that when Jesus' family discovered that he was gathering up disciples, "they went to restrain him, because they kept saying, "He's out of his mind!" (Mark 3:21) But he was not out of his mind, rather, his mind was focused on the things of God.

Jesus admonishes us to pay attention and see the world through the lens of the kingdom of God. Instead of looking into the western sky for signs of storm clouds or to the south for a warm wind, Jesus invites us to name the storms of injustice and the hot winds of hatred that blow across the our world. But he warns us that when we do, we are bound to suffer division.

And don't we know it—we have all likely had experiences when our desire to be disciples of Jesus Christ have separated and divided us from the ones we love. It happens in churches, it happens in families, it happens between friends. When we, as Christians, live with one foot in this world and one foot in the kingdom of God, we're bound to experience tension, soreness, and growing pains.

When I served a church in Rhode Island, dear Mrs. McGlory gave the church a gift of twenty-five thousand dollars to "make the church more welcoming". At the time, the church had dated landscaping and there was a proposal to use the money for landscaping. However, the church also had a nice wheel chair accessible ramp that led to a non-wheel chair accessible doorway. I proposed that we use six thousand dollars of the gift to convert that doorway into a handicap accessible door and then use the remaining nineteen thousand dollars for landscaping. My suggestion was met with consternation and claims that the door wasn't necessary because we didn't have any members in wheelchairs and that if a handicap person wanted into the church, we had enough strong men who could carry the person in. I had folks stopping by my office asking me to drop the whole issue and just vote for the landscaping. When the vote came up at a Church Council meeting—at which the landscape designer the church proposed to hire was in attendance—final vote tally was—16 for the landscaping, Robin against. My vote caused embarrassment for people who thought that I should have gone along to get along—especially in front of the architect. Others made snide comments on our way out of the meeting. Still others refused to speak to me after that vote. And if I had it to do all over again, though the tension was nearly unbearable and I cried all the way home from that meeting, I wouldn't change my vote.

You know, perhaps my initial response to this passage was all wrong, maybe Jesus doesn't have any 'splain to do. Perhaps this is one of the more comforting passages in scripture because it reminds us that following Jesus is not easy and that it was never meant to be. It reminds us that the bonds of relationship upon which we rely in this world—bonds that can be broken—are not as strong as our bond with God. It reminds us that we are not alone in our hurt and our anguish over division and strife. And, it reminds us that conflict is not only to be expected but can, in most instances, lead to growth and even new life. And so even if there is division, the division is not the end—it is often just the beginning—the beginning of the journey that eventually leads to the true peace of Jesus Christ—the peace that passes all understanding. So "Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid." Thanks be to God.