

Not Peace but Division

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."

Interpreting the Times

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?

57"Why don't you judge for yourselves what is right? 58As you are going with your adversary to the magistrate, try hard to be reconciled to him on the way, or he may drag you off to the judge, and the judge turn you over to the officer, and the officer throw you into prison. 59I tell you, you will not get out until you have paid the last penny."

Now after hearing today's Gospel reading I know what you're thinking—"Hot Dog! More stories about Robin's in-laws. These are juicier than episodes of 'Survivor'." But if I were to launch into stories about my in-laws I would have to admit that I forgot my mother in law's birthday, which was in late June, and that her gift is still sitting on the shelf in my office. And more than that, I'd have to admit that my sister-in-law's birthday present, which should have been in Massachusetts for her birthday in mid-July, is sitting on the shelf next to my mother-in-law's gift. And so, today, I'll skip the personal stories and just say that, according to scripture, my relationship with my in-laws, which many of you know can be strained, is really quite Biblical. "From now on there will be five in one family divided against each other, three against two and two against three. They will be divided . . . mother-in-law against daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law." But I must admit that most of the divisions that exist in Corey's and my extended families, divisions that have become more of a habit than a necessity, are nothing compared to the extent of division in families that Jesus talks about in this Gospel account. Sure any division, no matter how much light we try to make of it, is still hurtful and frustrating, but they are not all as ultimately devastating as he seems to indicate they could be.

However, we live in a nation that is well-acquainted with family divisions that are finally devastating to the family structure and, in some cases, have even been fatal. I can remember walking through a museum at the Gettysburg Battle Field with my grandma. I must have been about 6 years old. Or, perhaps I was 8 years old. And, there's a chance that I was twelve years old. It's not that I can't remember how old I was when we took a family vacation to Gettysburg, it's just that we seemed to take a lot of family vacations to Gettysburg. Though it was not always our final destination, it was at least a stopping off point. I swear, the Long Family Four could have been traveling in our 1985 maroon Buick Century from our home in Northwest Ohio to the Bad Lands in South Dakota and somehow we'd figure out a way to get there via Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. Anyway, I know it was a trip to Gettysburg when I was younger because I was at the age when I was holding Grandma's hand. We stopped at one of the displays of old dilapidated journals, all of them entombed in that fire-proof, double thick, green-edged glass that one finds covering such displays. As Grandma read, she remarked on how amazing it was that brothers would fight against brothers in a war. Now at that age, I was well-versed in fighting with my brother, but even I couldn't imagine actually taking sides with others against him. And I certainly would never try to actually kill him. Maim him, perhaps, but kill him—never.

But this was not true of many families throughout history, families that found themselves divided by philosophical, religious, or political issues to the extent that what were once loving and supportive relationships ended in betrayal, estrangement, and even death. Though this angst and division dates from as far back as Cain and Abel, the most poignant of these stories for us seem to come from the American Civil War. From the beginning stages of the conflict, according to the author of *The Divided Family in Civil War America*, Abraham Lincoln framed the conversation about the possibility of civil war with his famous line “a house divided against itself cannot stand.” As author writes, “For Lincoln, the family provided a rhetorical shorthand, allowing him in just six words to convey what slavery might do to the relationship between Northern and Southern citizens.”¹ And these words he spoke in 1858 would, unfortunately, come to fruition just years later with the outbreak of the war, a war in which the republic did nearly crumble, thousands died, and many families were torn apart over the issue of slavery and who, in the end, would determine who was and was not allowed to own them. Confederate leaders Robert E. Lee and Stonewall Jackson were estranged from their Union-sympathizing sisters and U. S. Senator John J. Crittenden from his confederate son. While it is an unfortunate thing to be divided from one you love on the basis of a difference of belief, it is quite another thing when that difference of belief becomes physically manifested on a battle field. Again, from *The Divided Family* . . .

Sometime during a battle at Perryville, Kentucky, in October 1862, two opposing regiments from that state exchanged gunfire. Among them was a soldier with the last name of Hopkins. Hopkins stood only twenty feet away from a group of enemy soldiers when he aimed, fired, and mortally wounded a soldier who, it turned out, was his own brother. It was no tragic coincidence. According to the *Louisville Daily Journal*, immediately after shooting him Hopkins approached his brother and told him that “he had done it on purpose . . .”

In this case, a member of the house that was divided would never stand again, indeed he drew his last breaths on the battlefield that day with his brother, his murderer, looking on. And Jesus said, “Do you think I came to bring peace on earth? No, I tell you, but division.” From now on there will be five in one family divided against each other, three against two and two against three.”

But why then do our sacred texts call him the Prince of Peace? Why then does it say that swords will be pound into plowshares and the lion will lie down with the lamb. Did Jesus miss Hebrew School the days they studied these scriptures? Was he suffering some confusion about his role in the grand scheme of things? No, he wasn't. And that's exactly the point—the grand scheme of things. Jesus isn't concerned about the day to day operations of families nor is he into the “can't we all just get along” mentality. Indeed, Jesus implies that we are so concerned with an inauthentic keeping of the peace in the here and now that we're missing the point of the there and then.

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Why don't they understand that there are more important things happening all around them than predicting tomorrow's weather or lamenting the recent drop in the Dow Jones Average? These are earthly matters with which Jesus is not concerned. His concern is for justice, righteousness, and mercy. And when keeping the peace in a family or friendship is done at the expense of justice, righteousness, and mercy—well, there in lies the rub. When keeping a family, a friendship, or even a marriage together comes at the expense of doing what is right and merciful and just, that's what Jesus has got a problem with. And I

¹ Murrell, Amy Taylor, *The Divided Family in Civil War America*, University of North Carolina Press, 2005, pg. 1.

think our Civil War example is a perfect one. If keeping the peace between brothers, sisters, mothers, and fathers becomes more important than an entire race of people being allowed to live as human beings instead of personal property, well then . . . I think that's exactly what Jesus would have a problem with. If it's more important for a family to stay together than for its members to do the right thing—well then, that's point at which Jesus says we've got it all wrong. And it's not just in this passage either—there's that bit that comes just two chapters later in this Gospel according to Luke when Jesus says “Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple.” Does he mean that literally? I, and many Biblical Scholars, tend not to think so. Instead, his command is that we love him more—more than we love our mother and father, more than we love our sister and brother, more than we love kids, more than we love ourselves. And he himself is the model for this behavior. He never deserted his family or betrayed them, he simply reminded them over and over again that his ministry on earth was more important than what they thought of him or their embarrassment over the ways in which he was making such a spectacle of himself. God's will was always more important than any of the limitations, expectations, or condemnations his family tried to place on him.

And what about us? In what ways are we missing the point—choosing our own comfort, giving into our own fear of conflict or division in order to keep the peace instead of standing up for and doing what is right? I know I do it all the time—I hate conflict, I want to be liked, and so sometimes I don't say it, do it, and sometimes even try not to think just so that I'll be sure that everybody is happy, which is absolutely ridiculous because who am I to think that I can keep everybody happy in the first place! Last week there was a repairman at our house. He was a chatty fellow and I'm a chatty gal so we started chatting. Somehow we got onto the topic of sports and he mentioned that he was a fan of Duke basketball. And why, because, according to the repairman, the coach of the Duke team is concerned with having athletes who are also good students and so his team's not full of those black boys. And I didn't say a thing. I have been at meetings in this church at which folks have said derogatory things about gay and lesbian people, not directly mind you but in the socially acceptable way of framing it as a joke, and I didn't say a thing. And why? Because I fear division and conflict amongst those in our church family more than I fear God's wrath and judgment. And you know what's crazy, I'm sweating and my heart is pumping up here just saying this stuff because I'm afraid that maybe one of you will call me in the morning and tell me you didn't like what I'm saying. And so pardon me for a moment as I quote Jesus to myself, “Hypocrite! 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?” And I wish we could, oh how I wish we would understand that this present time is but a passing moment in which keeping God happy should be so much more important than keeping everybody else happy. For with this understanding we would know that conflict in the here and now is inevitable and not only that, it is so much better than the hell we'll face in the there and then if we don't start living, right now, for the there and then instead of just living for the here and now.