

PEACE ON EARTH?

Luke 12:49-56

I remember, as a teenager, my father telling me of how his father very much discouraged him of dating Catholic girls. In Grandpa's opinion, a Catholic-Lutheran relationship would not work and would not be worth the hassle. I can still remember sitting at the dinner table after a long day of baling hay and my Grandpa lamenting that his youngest son, my uncle, had decided to marry a Jewish girl from New Jersey. There could be only one thing worse than marrying a Catholic girl — and my uncle had found it in Kenya, Africa while serving in the Peace Corps. But what really left an impression on me was that my Grandpa was able to work through his German Lutheran prejudice and flew with my Grandma to Kenya to meet Nancy. Oh, how following Jesus can divide families, but it doesn't have to.

My brother Donny, the farmer, married a very Catholic girl from Parma very committed to the doctrines of her church. She made it clear from the beginning that they would be married in the Catholic Church and their many children would be raised in the Catholic Church. They now have 10 children and 11 grandchildren and counting. My brother hasn't been to a worship service in years. Oh, how following Jesus can divide families.

My Grandpa died about 6 months before I met Danette, the German Lutheran Pastor's daughter. I know that he was smiling down from heaven that at least one of us got it right.

The division we experience today in our families over whether or not to follow Jesus, or how to follow Jesus, or what church to join that follows Jesus the right way is not the same

division that was being experienced in first century families struggling with whether or not to follow Jesus. Much more was at stake in the first century.

People, who engaged in inappropriate social activities like hanging around with this new sect of Christians, would be totally cut off from their families, their jobs, and their social network. Alienation from family or clan could literally be a matter of life and death, especially for the elite, who would risk everything by association with the wrong kind of people. Since the inclusive Christian communities demanded just this kind of association across status lines - everyone was welcome no matter how rich or how poor - the situation Jesus describes in our Gospel text was very real. Families would be divided against one another if one or two decided to become a Christian. And, as we know, some people were put to death in the first 4 centuries just for being Christian.

No one is being put to death in our country because of being a Christian. But we still very much experience division in our families over how to follow Jesus and over which church follows Jesus the right way.

It still grieves many in the older generation to watch some of their children and grandchildren join a church different than the one they were raised in, or join no church at all. Over these last years, we've had many of you join Divinity who were not raised in the Lutheran church. We've had many of our young people move to another town and join a different denomination. When young people are visiting churches today, the denomination of the church is usually not important.

When I ask our new member classes what brought them to Divinity I rarely hear the word "Lutheran". Rather, I hear things like: "Someone welcomed me when I visited"; "There's a lot going on here"; "The youth are active"; "The worship is meaningful and I like all the music"; "I can understand the sermons." Today, people are more interested in what the church is doing than they are in the name of the church.

So there is still the division between the generations that Jesus describes, but at least we're not killing one another over it, and rarely do I hear of someone being kicked out of, or ostracized from, a family for joining the wrong church.

What is worse today than in the first century is that we have division among Christians and division between Christian denominations on what is the "right way" to follow Jesus Christ.

When we had a family move to Florida and join a Missouri Synod church, they sent me a manifesto describing how evil the E.L.C.A. is for ordaining women and practicing open communion where any old Christian can come to the altar and receive the bread and wine. We have our differences on what is the right way to follow Jesus Christ and neither side will compromise on these issues. The division will remain.

People have asked me how I feel about entering into full communion with the Episcopalians, Presbyterians, and other denominations. I tell them we've been practicing full communion with the Episcopalians and Presbyterians for years. We've preached in one another's pulpits and we've communed in one another's churches for a long time. We were just ahead of our time. In some instances, the divisions between denominations can be overcome.

We now have several examples, both in Ohio and other states, where different denominations are sharing the same pastor. It is no longer uncommon to have a Presbyterian or Episcopalian church in a rural area connect with a rural Lutheran church to share a pastor.

Or, several congregations coming together to share a pastoral staff. Some divisions between Christians can be overcome and some will remain.

But the truth that Jesus shares is that the worst kind of fighting and division, whether it be in the first century or the 21st century, is the fighting and division within families, especially between parents and children. But, even in the midst of the worst fighting and division, there is still hope.

Ronald grew up on an Appalachian farmstead in western Pennsylvania. Twenty or so family members shared the same house, trying to eke a living from the land. His childhood was brutal; he tells of cousins who tried to hang one another and a grandmother who fired at disobedient children with a shotgun full of rock salt.

Ronald's father was an intelligent man though, and eventually he left the farm with his children and moved to Long Island, where he found work. His finances improved, but his relationships did not. His wife left him, and he routinely beat his children, sometimes severely. Ronald lived in constant fear of the violence that awaited him each day when he returned home from school.

Then his father was badly injured in an automobile accident. His neck was broken, and he was paralyzed from the neck down. Once the tyrant of the household, he was now a paraplegic, utterly dependent on others to care for his daily needs.

As a young adult, Ronald had every reason to abandon his father. Why should he stay and care for the man who ruined his life? Yet he never left his father's side. Although medical and disability benefits provided some nursing help, he took on most of his father's care himself. For years he faithfully saw to his father's daily needs – washing, dressing, and exercising the lifeless limbs that once beat him mercilessly, sometimes to the point of unconsciousness. Often he took him outdoors in his wheelchair, and they talked about the emotional battles they had fought and were still fighting.

Demons of the past still haunt Ronald on occasion, but he says he has finally found a measure of the peace he so sorely missed in his childhood. More than anything else, his loving service attests to the forgiveness and healing both he and his father now feel.

Parents and children who have been divided and fighting tend to give up any hope of reconciliation and forgiveness. But then something happens as with Ronald and his father that opens the door to hope and new life.

My Grandpa overcame his prejudice and welcomed the Jewish girl into our family. I have not lost hope that one day my brother will be reconciled with the church. As denominations like ours enter into "full communion" with other denominations, we are hopeful for a stronger church in mission. And we are hopeful that divisions within families can be reconciled as Ronald was able to become reconciled, even with an abusive father, through his standing by his father and serving him in the midst of tragedy.

Historically, following Jesus has led to division as Jesus said that it would. Yet we do not lose hope and we do not stop working for reconciliation, forgiveness, and peace in our

relationships with one another. We continue to serve one another as Ronald continued to serve his father. For his father was certainly one of “the least of these” that Jesus challenged us to serve for in serving the “least of these” we would be serving him.

Maybe the most important way we serve others is in serving our children; all of our children, whether it’s refugee children or Divinity children.

I have a vivid memory that I will always carry with me of a hospital room at Rainbow Children’s on June 10, 2018. We packed into the room to baptize big sister Ava and little Harrison. God was present in that room, making our children his own in Holy Baptism. Harrison rests eternally in his arms.

In the same way God is present tonight in the waters of holy baptism and the faith of all who worship here, to make Bennett his own. As a congregation we promise to serve Bennett and all of our children. In serving our children, we are serving God.

May the peace of God . . .

WOV #770 – Borning Cry