

Sermon Proper 15 Year C August 15, 2010

Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division! Amen.

This gospel is a tough one, so I have borrowed some of thoughts from a preaching site called **out in scripture** and the **NY Times**. Our readings remind us that there are some things worth dividing over. Jesus reminds us in Luke that a part of his mission is one of judgment and division. This division can even enter into families where members will turn against each other. It is important to note that despite the strong imagery, Jesus never encouraged his followers to resort to violence.

But this passage begs the question of why Jesus would want to use such violent imagery when he was peaceable. **One reason is to remind us that a life as a follower of Christ will inevitably lead to conflict.**

Jesus is certainly the "Prince of Peace," but that is far different from peace at any cost. The peace that Jesus sought to bring is first and foremost a peace with God. Such a peace will lead to peace among humanity, but we must remember the direction in which godly peace flows. It flows first from a life lived in communion with God and then outward to the world around us. What Jesus is reminding us is that such a peace is not always welcome and is often met with violent resistance. Jesus' words are cautionary for those who take a life of discipleship too lightly.

To get a vivid picture of this we can look at Hebrews. The writer runs through a list of ancestors in faith. This is a difficult passage because some of the references are to incidents of violence and destruction. Even

so, we also see in the list those who were tortured, imprisoned and killed for their faithfulness. Others "went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, persecuted, tormented." The "world was not worthy" of these saints. It is often difficult for us to relate to passages such as this because of the relative religious freedom we enjoy.

I want to consider briefly two areas in our contemporary debate that are pitting father against son, mother against daughter and, mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law.

Last Sunday's New York Times published an article **Battles Around Nation over Proposed Mosques**. I'd like to read from this article to help us reflect on ways we Christians are divided in our response to our Muslim brothers and sisters.

"While a high-profile battle rages over a mosque near ground zero in Manhattan, heated confrontations have also broken out in communities across the country where mosques are proposed for far less hallowed locations.

In Murfreesboro, Tenn., Republican candidates have denounced plans for a large Muslim center proposed near a subdivision, and hundreds of protesters have turned out for a march and a county meeting.

In late June, in Temecula, Calif., members of a local Tea Party group took dogs and picket signs to Friday prayers at a mosque that is seeking to build a new worship center on a vacant lot nearby.

In Sheboygan, Wis., a few Christian ministers led a noisy fight against a Muslim group that sought permission to open a mosque in a former health food store bought by a Muslim doctor.

At one time, neighbors who did not want mosques in their backyards said their concerns were over traffic, parking and noise — the same reasons they might object to a church or a synagogue. But now the gloves are off.

In all of the recent conflicts, opponents have said their problem is Islam itself. They quote passages from the Koran and argue that even the most Americanized Muslim secretly wants to replace the Constitution with Islamic Shariah law.

Last week I heard these very same arguments being bantered about while I was having lunch at Parke's Place just down the road.

"These local skirmishes make clear that there is now widespread debate about whether the best way to uphold America's democratic values is to allow Muslims the same religious freedom enjoyed by other Americans, or to pull away the welcome mat from a faith seen as a singular threat.

"What's different is the heat, the volume, the level of hostility," said Ihsan Bagby, associate professor of Islamic studies at the University of Kentucky. "It's one thing to oppose a mosque because traffic might increase, but it's different when you say these mosques are going to be nurturing terrorist bombers, that Islam is invading, that civilization is being undermined by Muslims."

Recently, a small group of activists became alarmed about a mosque. Diana Serafin, a grandmother who lost her job in tech support this year, said she reached out to others she knew from attending Tea Party events and anti-immigration rallies. She said they read books by

critics of Islam. She also attended a meeting of the local chapter of ACT! for America, a Florida-based group that says its purpose is to defend Western civilization against Islam. “As a mother and a grandmother, I worry,” Ms. Serafin said. “I learned that in 20 years with the rate of the birth population, we will be overtaken by Islam, and their goal is to get people in Congress and the Supreme Court to see that Shariah is implemented. My children and grandchildren will have to live under that.” “I do believe everybody has a right to freedom of religion,” she said. “But Islam is not about a religion. It’s a political government, and it’s 100 percent against our Constitution.”

Another area in contemporary discourse that creates divisions is the topic regarding lesbians and gay persons. To underscore the division in families I’ll use my own story. In 1981 Art and I formed a family. At the very start of our relationship we were clear that our faith played a central role. I was very careful to keep my relationship with Art a secret from my family for fear of rejection.

I will never forget the phone call I got one morning. Art and I were in our living room having our morning prayers and the phone rang...it was my mother. She said, “I know what you’re doing.” I said what and made her honestly say what it is that I was being accused of. She said she would never speak to me again. While those words hurt I knew they were not true. In spite of all kinds of things that went wrong in my family the love there was simply too strong to be denied among us, but the division and the pain were still there for several years.

Toward the end of the phone conversation my mom made me promise that I would not tell my dad because of the pain she would suffer if he knew. We played this “not telling dad” game a lot in my family because “he couldn’t handle it.” So I kept the secret...a secret that divided me and my dad for nearly 15 years, at least until I realized there was a name to the game we played in our family called triangulation...and we did it exceedingly well.

In the mid-1990s I called my dad and said I was sending him a plane ticket to come to DC there was something I needed to tell him. He came, all the while knowing what I had to say. I remember being with him in a bar having a beer and I told him about Art and me, he said “He already knew. That trip ended an unspoken division between us. But even then it has not been easy for my parents to accept my relationship, not to mention when kids came in the picture. They also weren’t too thrilled at first when I left the Roman Catholic Church, but that’s another sermon.

The author of Hebrews today tells us— to 'run with perseverance the race that is set before us,' no matter who we are. Can we claim our place today, or one day, to be part of that 'cloud of witnesses' for those who will come after us?"

Our encounter with God affirms our full humanity and it is from that place that each of us must speak out. As we speak from this place, we will meet resistance from those unwilling to hear God's voice as it relates to us. **We also must not be so concerned with our own rights that we neglect to advocate for others around the world who live in fear and oppression.** As we hear in psalm 82...."Give justice to the weak and the

orphan; maintain the right of the lowly and the destitute. Rescue the weak and the needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked".

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