

Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, the opposite is true: I have come to bring division.

Now this is what makes my job difficult. My job is to bring the gospel, the good news - even after reading a text like this. This text is why pastors, if they're smart, go on vacation during August and avoid this depiction of Jesus that is glaringly inconsistent with what we're used to. Is this the same Jesus we sing about at Christmastime as the 'Prince of Peace'? The same Rabbi Jesus who taught about the unconditional love of God and the inclusivity of God's realm? Or the 'Suffering Servant' Jesus who willingly accepted death rather than back down from the truth of the difference between God's realm and the realm of empire?

Even the turning over the tables of the moneychangers in the temple - we can understand that; that was 'righteous' anger. But this, this is different; this is intentional. "I have come to bring division." If we were in the crowd that day, we might have asked, "Where is Jesus; what have you done with him?" Or today we might ask, "What was Luke thinking when he put this into his 'gospel?'"

The strange thing, though, is that I like this text. Instead of wanting to avoid it, I find myself resonating with it. And as I meditated with it this week, I realized that what I like about it is its unflinching honesty about the cost of discipleship. Talking and teaching the way Jesus talked and taught not only caused division, it got him killed. So it is reasonable to expect that following Jesus would involve the risk of having very serious implications.

We see that in the Hebrews text. The list of our ancestors in faith includes some who were tortured, imprisoned and killed. The descriptions of their martyrdoms sound strange, even bizarre to us today. It's hard for us to imagine facing persecution or execution. We're more likely to expect incredulity or apathy or being mistakenly identified as 'those other kinds of Christians'. But the historical record does show that atrocities such as Hebrews describes did happen. These witnesses did pay a high price for their risk-taking. As have martyrs of our own time.

But here we have Jesus talking about divisions in families. Luke has put together elements from collections of the sayings of Jesus, material from Mark and Matthew and other sources, but also recollections from the life experiences of the author himself, who knows about families being divided because of their commitment to the way of Jesus: "father against son, mother against daughter." These words of Jesus strike at the heart of the most important societal relationship of all - the family.

But Jesus was not about subverting the family structure. His outburst was a call to wake up and smell the coffee. "You want to be a disciple? OK, but there will be risks involved." It's almost as if he's shouting at people who are not paying attention to what's going on - like a teacher, in a disruptive classroom, getting frustrated and reaching the limit of his patience. So he scolds them: "You hypocrites! If you can figure out the weather, why can't you see what's going on here?" By jolting them into awareness of the challenges inherent in a life of discipleship, Jesus also warns us not to take our discipleship too lightly.

For me, this Jesus is a real Jesus, a divine-infused presence of what it means to be an authentic human being, who knows that, like dark clouds or a dry wind, his teachings and acts of compassion will forecast the opposition to come. But remember that everything Jesus said and did was about one thing: to make us aware of the living reality of the realm of God. In order to do this he would not use or condone violence. He would raise neither flag nor sword but instead would die on a cross, which would become the symbol of the vulnerability of life in the realm of God for all of us.

Yes, Jesus is the 'Prince of Peace,' but that doesn't mean peace at any cost. There are some things worth standing up for; there are some things worth dividing over. The peace that Jesus seeks to bring is first and foremost peace with God, which can then lead to peace among us. Peace, true peace, flows out from communion with God, and then outward into the world. But what Jesus is shouting at us to remember is that such a peace or attempts at peace will not always be welcome.

There seems to be a contradiction here: the wonder of living in the realm of God and the reality of opposition to it. I'm reminded of the opening lines of Scott Peck's *The Road Less Traveled*: "Life is difficult . . . once we truly see this truth, we transcend it. Once we truly know that life is difficult - once we truly understand and accept it - then life is no longer difficult. Because once it is accepted, the fact that life is difficult no longer matters." I would argue that it does still matter, but our acceptance of the inevitability of difficulty does enable us to transcend it – as Jesus did.

So what kind of weather forecasting do we need to do to discern the signs of our times? How are we to find any good news in all this talk of difficulty, and conflict, and division? We go back to the scriptures that Jesus knew so well. The Isaiah text is the famous parable of the vineyard, which begins as a tender love song, but turns to anger: the relationship between the vineyard and the vinedresser has gone sour. Also in the Psalm: a vine lovingly planted and tended has now been trampled.

Both the metaphor of vine and vineyard are about the relationship between God and God's people. Both describe the wreckage of life without a healthy relationship with the Creator. What God desires is a healthy relationship with the beloved, out of which flows peace, justice, joy, and all the goodness that the Creator has always intended for us: in other words, the realm of God that Jesus preached, that Jesus risked his life for and wanted for his followers both then and now.

This is the good news, that the realm of God is here – if we want it. Part of the call to discern the signs of our times is to appraise the health of our own vineyard. Or pea patch. Our theme for the summer has been 'Growing as a Congregation of Disciples.' More than any other texts this summer, these scripture readings remind us of the delight of living in God's realm, while also reminding us that being part of it can be risky. The stronger we get as healthy, thriving vines, the more we will be exposed to the elements of a hostile world.

Being a follower of Jesus is serious business. If you're looking for a nice, comfortable religion, where you can sit back and relax – this isn't it. If you're looking for a church that will provide you with spiritual nurture but won't ask for your help in creating a better world - this isn't it. If you think that being a Christian means you'll always be happy and peaceful and contented and never have any more problems – nope. No more difficulties – nope. Maybe even conflict – yep. Maybe even division – yep.

Now I know that we stand in the Lutheran tradition which says that our right relationship with God is a gift of grace. It is free, no strings attached. And as Luther would say, "This is most certainly true." However, we never want to fall into what German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer called 'cheap grace.' In his book, *The Cost of Discipleship*, which makes the distinction between 'cheap' and 'costly' grace, Bonhoeffer defined 'cheap grace' in part as 'grace without discipleship.'

Instead, he wrote in part: "costly grace confronts us as a gracious call to follow Jesus . . . It is costly because it compels (one) to submit to the yoke of Christ and follow him; it is grace because Jesus says: 'My yoke is easy and my burden is light.'" *The Cost of Discipleship* was published in 1937, when the Nazis were coming to power in Germany. It was in the shadow of that 'empire' that Bonhoeffer's theology of costly discipleship was developed, and it ultimately cost him his life at the hands of 'empire.'

Most of us, probably none of us, will be called upon to risk our lives – at least not in the same way as the first century martyrs or twentieth century martyrs like King, Romero and Bonhoeffer. But that doesn't mean that we are not called to take risks of our own. We certainly can point to the risk that this congregation took 20 years ago. And the risk of moving and other decisions that were not easy and did cause some division.

But what of each of us in our own growth as followers of Jesus? Where in your life are you perhaps hearing a call to boldness? Is Jesus beckoning you forward, saying, "What? You think that I have come to bring peace and make you comfortable? No, the opposite is true: I have come to make you squirm."

The old saying of the purpose of the gospel is clichéd but true: that it is ‘to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable.’ And sometimes we are both at the same time. Being a follower of Jesus is serious business. Thankfully, God takes us seriously and is with us in all our endeavors. May we always be prepared to interpret the signs of our present time and to step out in risk-taking faith.

Amen

Isaiah 5:1-7

Israel and Judah, the northern and southern kingdoms resulting from the breakup of the united kingdom of David and Solomon, were being threatened by advancing Assyrian armies circa 722 BC. Isaiah saw this threat as God’s judgment for the injustice and apostasy of God’s people. This lyrical poem described them as a vineyard that failed to produce good fruit and so had to be destroyed.

Let me now sing of my beloved –
it is a love song about a vineyard.
My beloved had a vineyard
on a fertile hillside.
My beloved dug the soil,
cleared the stones,
and planted the choicest vines;
then within it built a watchtower,
and constructed a winepress.
My beloved anticipated the crop of grapes,
but what it yielded was wild grapes.

Now, inhabitants of Jerusalem and people of Judah-
judge between me and my vineyard:
What more could I have done for my vineyard
that I have not done?
Why, when I looked for the crop of grapes,
did it bring forth bad fruit?

Now I will tell you
what I mean to do to my vineyard.
I will take away its hedge, give it over to grazing,
break through its wall, let it be trampled!
I will let it go to wilderness;
it will not be pruned or hoed,
but overgrown with briars and thorns.
I will command the clouds
not to send rain upon it.

The vineyard of YHWH Omnipotent
is the house of Israel,
and the people of Judah are God’s cherished vine.
YHWH looked for justice, but found bloodshed;
for righteousness, but found only a cry of suffering.

Hebrews 11:29-12:2

This passage recalls more of Israel's religious heroes and describes how they suffered because of their faith. Then it gives the reason for this recital of their heroic endurance. We too may join them in following the example of the greatest of all, Jesus, who suffered death on the cross and now reigns with God.

By faith, the people passed through the Red Sea as though on dry land, but when the Egyptians tried to do the same, they drowned.

By faith, the walls of Jericho fell after being encircled for seven days.

By faith, Rahab the prostitute did not perish with those who were disobedient, after she welcomed the spies in peace.

And what more can I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets. These were those who through faith conquered nations, administered justice, and obtained the promises. They shut the jaws of lions, quenched raging fires, and emerged unscathed from battle. They were weak people who were given strength, became brave in battle and put foreign invaders to flight. Some came back from the dead to their spouses by resurrection. Others submitted to torture, refusing release, so that they could rise again to a better life.

Still others endured mocking, flogging, and even chains and imprisonment.

They were stoned to death, sawn in two, even beheaded. They were homeless, dressed in the skins of sheep and goats, destitute, persecuted, tormented - the world was not worthy of them! – and they wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground.

These are all heroes of our faith, but none of them received what was promised, since God had provided something better for us, so that they would not be made perfect apart from us.

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside everything that impedes us and the sin that so easily entangles us. Let us run with perseverance the race laid out for us. Let us not lose sight of Jesus, who leads us in our faith and brings it to perfection. For the sake of the joy to come, Jesus endured the cross, heedless of its shame, and now sits at the right of God's throne.

Luke 12:49-56

This apocalyptic vision of conflict about what Jesus means presents us with a picture of what may have actually happened in the community for which Luke was writing his gospel in the second last decade of the 1st century. Confronted with expulsion from the synagogues and threatened with persecution by the Romans, it would have been natural for them to seek a deeper understanding of what was happening to them in the Jewish traditions about the end of time and the teachings of Jesus himself. No one can tell how much of these words were actually spoken by Jesus or created by Luke for his audience.

Jesus said: "I have come to bring fire to the earth. How I wish the blaze was already ignited!

I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and how great is my distress until it is accomplished!

Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, the opposite is true: I have come to bring division. From now on a household of five will be divided - three against two and two against three, father against son, son against father, mother against daughter, daughter against mother, mother-in-law against daughter-in-law, daughter-in-law against mother-in-law."

Jesus said again to the crowds, "When you see a cloud rising in the west, you immediately say that rain is coming - and so it does. When the wind blows from the south, you say it's going to be hot - and so it is.

You hypocrites! If you can interpret the portents of earth and sky, why can't you interpret the present time?"