

Uncomfortable Blessings

Luke 12:49-56

Holman Christian Standard Bible (HCSB)

Not Peace but Division

49 "I came to bring fire on the earth, and how I wish it were already set ablaze! **50** But I have a baptism to be baptized with, and how it consumes Me until it is finished! **51** Do you think that I came here to give peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division! **52** From now on, five in one household will be divided: three against two, and two against three.

53 They will be divided, father against son,
son against father,
mother against daughter,
daughter against mother,
mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law,
and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law."

Interpreting the Time

54 He also said to the crowds: "When you see a cloud rising in the west, right away you say, 'A storm is coming,' and so it does. **55** And when the south wind is blowing, you say, 'It's going to be a scorcher!' and it is. **56** Hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of the earth and the sky, but why don't you know how to interpret this time?

Sometimes we want to know what's going to happen in the future.

Metorologists tell us if it's going to be stormy or sunny so we can plan a picnic or stay inside and read.

During the day you may think about what you will have for dinner. And, you may wonder if there will be dessert after dinner.

Do you ever count the days until your birthday?

During the summer perhaps your kids think about who your new teachers will be.

They may wonder what they will be when they grow up.

Jesus says we should think about the future, especially our future with God, but he also advises us to think about the present time. He advises us to be aware of what is going on around us right now. Notice things - the way sun shines through the rain causing a rainbow, the way a flower grows, the way moonlight shines through your window. Notice the pattern of stars, how a stone feels in your hand, how fresh bread smells while it is baking, and how good it feels to be hugged by someone who loves you.

Noticing and being grateful for God's gifts is a way of living our lives to the fullest. It is how we live in the present time.

Now, this very day we can be aware and thankful for the beauty and love that is around us, living the life God has planned for each one of us.

The prophet Isaiah calls Jesus the Prince of Peace (Isaiah 9:6), and that's the way we like to think of him.

Wonderful Counselor!
Mighty God!
Everlasting Father!
Prince of Peace!

I can hardly consider those words without hearing a choir singing Handel's Messiah. Prince of Peace! We need peace! Our world is turbulent! Our lives are turbulent! We welcome the Prince of Peace!

But in our Gospel lesson today, Jesus startles us by telling us that he has not come to bring peace. He says instead that he has come to bring division. Then he spells out what he means in painful detail. He says that families will be divided because of him. In a family of five people, three will be for Jesus and two against, or two will be for Jesus and three against. Father will line up against son, and son against father. Mother will line up against daughter, and daughter against mother.

That bothers us. We know that family relationships sometimes break down, but we find that pretty sad. We want Jesus to be solution to that problem—not the cause. But, here in our Gospel lesson, Jesus warns us that he will bring division.

Sometimes it's literally true that Jesus divides families. Many of us have, at some time in our lives, known a young person who has been alienated from his or her parents because he or she has chosen a religious path that the parents did not approve. On one occasion, there was a wedding between a Catholic man and a Jewish woman. It was a big wedding. Very fancy! Everyone from both families was there and they were all trying to behave, but you could have cut the tension

with a knife. That young couple's marriage was hard for both families to accept.

Jesus said, "Do you think that I have come to give peace in the earth? I tell you, no, but rather division. For from now on, there will be five in one house divided, three against two, and two against three" (vv. 51-52). Jesus is warning us that his call to discipleship will not lead to an easy life. He is warning us that the Christian road is not wide and smooth but narrow and pocked with potholes. He is telling us to expect that, if we follow him, we should not be surprised to find people opposing us in our workplace, in our church, in our neighborhood, and even in our own family.

Our families are at the core of our being. We experience our closest relationships within our families. It would be an exaggeration to say that, within families, all is love. Indeed, we experience not only love but anger and frustration and all sorts of emotions within our families. We would like to believe in storybook endings—princes and princesses—"happily ever after"—but we know that marriage is not always like that. A number of years ago, someone asked Ruth Graham if she had ever considered divorcing her husband, Billy Graham. She said, "No! I never considered divorce." Then she paused a moment and continued, "Homicide maybe, but never divorce." Most women can understand that!

But our family doesn't have to be perfect to be important.

Our family, with all its warts and bumps, is at the center of our being. It shapes us. It gives us identity. It is the place where we feel most connected. In a magazine article, a man from Mississippi, Scott Brunner, said, "When you meet a true Southerner, the first question he'll ask you is, 'Who's yore daddy?' The next one will be 'Where do you go to church?'"

When you think about it, both of those questions have to do with families. "Who's yore daddy?" has to do with your earthly family. "Where do you go to church?" has to do with your spiritual family. It's no coincidence that people in the South often speak of having a "church home" or a "church family."

It was even more so in Jesus' day! People tended to live in one place for their whole lives. They knew their neighbors. Family relationships were all important. People knew who you were because they knew your dad and your mom. The family gave you identity. It also helped you to survive. In that day and age, they didn't have public welfare. They didn't have Social Security. They didn't have company pension plans. Very few people could save enough money to see them through their old age. Their family was their safety net. Families took care of their own. They took care of the young—and the old—and the sick. Without your family, you were alone in a very tough world.

Jesus says, "Do you think that I have come to give peace in the earth? I tell you, no, but rather division. For from now on,

there will be five in one house divided, three against two, and two against three." He was telling us that Christian discipleship would not be easy. He was telling Christians to expect opposition. He was warning us that faithful discipleship can lead to big trouble.

The reason is simple. Jesus came to redeem a sinful world, and the sinful world doesn't want to be redeemed. Jesus came to transform sinners, and sinners don't want to be transformed. Jesus came to usher us from the kingdom of this world into the kingdom of God, and that transition can be as disorienting as a Marine Corps boot camp.

Jesus says that the kingdom of God is an upside-down world in which the first shall be last and the last shall be first. The kingdom of God is an upside-down world in which we are called to care for the poor and vulnerable instead of trying to make friends with the rich and powerful. Jesus calls us to start living by Kingdom of God Rules right now. That is tough! It is dangerous! It causes all kinds of conflict!

There is no shortage of stories to illustrate the difficulties associated with being a committed Christian. In Jacksonville, Florida, members of St. Paul Missionary Baptist Church warned their pastor, John Guns, that there was a \$25,000 bounty on his head because of his work to clean up the area. Who could possibly oppose cleaning up a poor neighborhood? Drug dealers, of course! Criminals! \$25,000 is petty cash to those people. Pastor Guns was encouraged by

a demonstration in his behalf by a large group of pastors and other Christians. A City Councilwoman, Ginger Soud, said, "The answer to the problems in our society is the church." She told Pastor Guns, "I support you personally, spiritually, and politically. You are doing the right thing." That, of course, was the problem. Pastor Guns was doing the right thing, and that offended people who had bad things on their minds.

That reminded me of an American missionary family I heard of in Vietnam. The husband and wife were an attractive couple. Their daughter must have been ten or twelve years old. The three of them lived among the Vietnamese in the city of Can Tho. It was a dangerous place. You could venture into Can Tho during the day, but at night you would be glad to retreat behind guarded walls. I often wonder how the parents could bring their daughter to such a place. I thought that they must be the bravest people that I had ever heard of.

The fact is that Christians have been going into harm's way for centuries to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Their efforts have borne much fruit. The world is a very different place because of their efforts, but they have taken grave risks and have sometimes paid a terrible price.

But the God of the Upside-Down Kingdom makes it right! The God who turns the world's foolishness into wisdom and the world's weakness into strength also makes it right for

those who seek first God's kingdom. Philip Yancey is a well-known Christian journalist who has interviewed many people during his career. He divides those people into two groups—stars and servants. Stars include great athletes, movie stars, and celebrities. Yancey talks about how we envy people like that—how we almost worship them. Then he says, "Yet I must tell you that, in my limited experience, these our 'idols' are as miserable a group of people as I have ever met." He goes on to tell about their troubled marriages and their dependence on psychotherapy.

Then Yancey talks about the servants—missionaries—people like Dr. Paul Brand, who worked in rural India among leprosy patients. He talks about Wycliffe Translators serving in remote areas among primitive tribes. He says, "I was prepared to honor and admire these servants, to hold them up as inspiring examples. I was not, however, prepared to envy them. But as I now reflect on the two groups side by side, stars and servants, the servants clearly emerge as the favored ones, the graced ones. They work for low pay, long hours, and no applause, 'wasting' their talents and skills among the poor and uneducated. But somehow in the process of losing their lives they have found them" (Philip Yancey, *Where Is God When It Hurts?*, page 45).

So Jesus brings conflict, but he also brings peace. The conflict which he brings is like a surgeon's knife, poised not to hurt but to heal.

Seek first God's kingdom. Put Christ first in your life. Seek to do the right thing. Jesus does not promise that it will be an easy road, because we will be fighting evil powers. Jesus does, however, promise to bless us. In the end, he will bring us peace.