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Christ Lutheran Church, Ferndale, WA

Tenth Sunday after Pentecost

August 14, 2022

Jeremiah 23:23-29; Psalm 82; Hebrews 11:29-12:2; Luke 12:49-56

My guess is that even if you're the kind of person who has Bible verses posted around your house you do not have these words from Jesus hanging up somewhere: "Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division! From now on five in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three; they will be divided: father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law."

No, these are not the feel-good, comforting Bible verses that we purchase on coffee cups or posters for our home or office. No one likes these words from Jesus.

I will say that these verses from the Revised Common Lectionary – our three year cycle of texts that we hear on Sunday mornings – does make us look at the parts of scripture that normally we'd turn away from. My guess is that you won't often hear these texts in churches that do series preaching where the preacher gets to choose the texts. But this keeps us honest about what's really in the Bible, and it also helps us to understand that we don't have a different God in the Old Testament than the New Testament – in both testaments are hard words, challenging words, as well as comforting words, and hopeful words.

So today we will deal with and be honest about what Jesus meant when he said these hard, challenging words. And I'm also going to take this opportunity to talk about a subject that this gospel passage alludes to which might affect you: the issue of family estrangement.

But first, let's talk about Jesus. Now these words from Jesus come in chapter 12 of Luke, and over the course of the last several chapters we've heard Jesus say that he has come to bring good news to the poor, release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, and to let the oppressed go free. He

has cured people whom others wouldn't come close to, including a leper, a man with an unclean spirit, and a paralytic. He has eaten with tax collectors and sinners, picked grain on the sabbath, and healed a man with a withered hand on another sabbath. He has given blessings to the poor, hungry and sorrowing, and woes to the rich, full, and laughing. He has told his followers to love their enemies and to not judge or condemn, lest they be judged or condemned. He has forgiven a sinful woman, and welcomed the touch of a woman who had been hemorrhaging – something that would have made him ritually unclean. Jesus has been speaking, and acting, and living out justice, and all along the Pharisees, scribes, and even his own disciples have questioned him and ignored his teachings. They have argued about who is the greatest among themselves, not trusted in his guidance to feed the 5,000, and demanded from Jesus a sign from heaven. In fact, the last verses of chapter 11 say "the scribes and the Pharisees began to be very hostile toward him and to cross-examine him about many things, lying in wait for him, to catch him in anything he might say."

Jesus' every attempt to bring about justice was challenged. It's no wonder that this very human Jesus got to the point that he did in Luke chapter 12: "I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled!" I imagine Jesus thinking, "do you people not get it? God's kingdom is different than what you believe and how you are living. In God's kingdom, all are equal and welcome. I have not come to bring peace but judgement upon injustice."

I imagine Jesus' passion made him think, "In order for God's vision to redeem, repair, and save those who have suffered and live under oppression, it may be that you will have to think and act differently than your family members. It may be that there will be division – father against son, and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law, and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law."

Jesus' passion for God's justice was so important, he even recognized that achieving it might cause family division. As we know and perhaps have experienced, the way of the cross sometimes leads followers to encounter hostility and rejection, even from those they love.

I wonder if in your family, a passion for justice or just a different way of thinking has caused division or estrangement from others. If you are cut off from one or more family members, you are definitely not alone. According to sociologist Karl Pillemer, author of *Fault Lines: Fractured Families and How to Mend Them*, approximately 25 million people in the United States are cut off from a parent or a child. About 20 million are estranged from a sibling. The remainder of estrangements, about 22 million, involve cousins, aunts, uncles, grandparents, nieces, nephews, and other relatives. Altogether, this equals about 25%, a quarter of the entire population of the United States is cut off from someone they have loved, and I'm guessing this might be true for many of you.

I wanted to talk about this today on a day that we hear about estrangement in the Bible, because I don't believe that even Jesus wanted families to remain estranged. In other places in the gospels, Jesus tried to help Martha and Mary understand each other when there was division between them. Jesus told the parable of the prodigal son who was reunited with his father after being estranged. Jesus' whole ministry was about reconciliation and resurrection between God and humans and humans with one another.

Karl Pillemer interviewed 1,600 people who were estranged from at least one family member and found that estrangement happens when one or more people who are related to one another come to the point of saying "I am done....done trying, done working to make the relationship better, done accommodating demands, done overlooking intolerable behavior, done apologizing for a lifestyle to someone who does not approve, or done with disrespect for a spouse or partner." The stories people have about why estrangement began vary, but the common thread is the feeling of being done, and then acting upon that feeling by cutting off communication with those they feel hurt by.

But there's also another common thread that Pillemer found in his research. He says, "I learned that people who are estranged from a family member feel deep sadness, long for reconnection, and wish they could turn back the clock and act differently to prevent the rift." One of his research participants described the estrangement from her daughter like this: "I have a scar on my chest from heart surgery. Okay, it's healed, it's a scar. But the estrangement is an open wound. Every day I have to wrap myself and

insulate myself and protect myself, because it's an open wound. You can't fix it, you can't change it. It's still there every day. You can't recover from it. I will tell you: I went through divorce, I went through heart surgery – piece of cake compared with losing a child like this."

The pain of estrangement disrupts our human need for reliable, secure, and predictable social relationships and leads to ambiguous loss, chronic stress, and hopelessness. But there is something Pillemer learned from those in his study who had reconciled: whether they had created the estrangement or were on the receiving end, no one regretted having reconciled. Indeed, some of them saw the reconciliation as one of their most important life experiences. One of the people he studied who had reconciled said this: (p.99)

I won't say a lot more about the book since I hope if you have an estrangement you buy the book or borrow mine, since it includes a roadmap to reconciliation.

But I want you to know this. You can think differently than your family, you can have a passion like Jesus did and do things differently, and yes, it may cause division, just as Jesus pointed out. But, if it is possible and safe for you, staying connected to those who you have loved and have loved you, that may be resurrection and reconciliation embodied.

Jesus promises that you are not alone, and that there is another way. There is an alternative to what is. May you find the peace and grace and strength and hope to let it be so. Amen.