

A Sermon for the Second Sunday after Pentecost 2014 Proper 7A
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“So have no fear of them; for nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known?”

Don't you just love it when Jesus gets all apocalyptic like this, when he starts throwing tables around, or calling people hypocrites and vipers, or talking about fire and strife and division as if it were a good thing? Today's gospel lesson leans particularly heavily on what I like to think of as Jesus' own family values: father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against daughter-in-law. Maybe it sounds like your own family. This is not your cozy, 'Prince of Peace,' 'Jesus loves the little children,' 'Jesus wants me for a sunbeam' Jesus of popular image. This Jesus, to use the phrase from C. S. Lewis's *The Chronicles of Narnia*, is “not a tame lion.”

But Jesus isn't exactly anti-family in other parts of the gospel. He forbids divorce. He bartends at a wedding. He... come to think of it, the list of pro-family things Jesus does or says is pretty short, while the list of anti-family things, from the teenage Jesus' telling Joseph to butt out of his real father's business, to forbidding would-be followers from saying goodbye to their families or burying dead parents, is actually a longer list.

But you have to think about what ‘family’ meant in Jesus’ day. The family was the smallest indissoluble social unit in the Middle East in Late Antiquity. Your identity, your prestige, your authority and your social sphere were exactly equal to that of your family. Family shame or family honor was shared equally by all members, and changes in family honor or shame meant changes in the social status, marriage opportunities, power and wealth of everyone in the family. We tend to think of those social values as being personal. We don’t hold the shortcomings of parents, siblings or children against people, we complain about our relatives’ shortcomings to our friends, and we think of families as relationships of choice as much as birth, as varied in make-up as people are varied in needs and desires.

But in Jesus’ day, you could not freely join or leave a family. You could not complain about your family to outsiders without losing status for yourself and your family. Those without family involuntarily, such as widows and orphans, were reduced to slavery or worse. And those who voluntarily abandoned the ties of family became less than human, and were ostracized by the whole community.

So when Jesus talks about dividing families, he’s talking about something more than just family feuds and brothers going off to make their fortunes in the Yukon. He’s even talking about something more radical than parents disowning children, as awful as that is. He’s talking about the absolute destruction of his

community's social order – the abandonment of the entire system of relationships, social hierarchies and power that gave meaning and identity and structure to the everyday lives of his people.

You see, Jesus isn't particularly anti-family, but he's trying to bring about a new world order, one that matches God's purpose for humankind. And so, Jesus is against pretty much anything – traditional family values, the government, organized religion – that stands in the way of God's purpose. He is willing, even eager, to put the torch to any institution that interferes with his mission. Small wonder that the two most powerful institutions of his day, empire and temple, want to do the same thing to Jesus that he wants to do to them.

And we face a similar issue today. Institutions tend to be very powerful at self-preservation. And we generally like our institutions, especially church and state, to be strong and stable. We get a lot of stability and a fair amount of identity from the institutions we claim as our own. Phrases like "I am an American" and "I am an Episcopalian" have more power to comfort and strengthen than "I am a citizen of the world" or "I am a person of faith."

But Jesus' message challenges the institutions that define us in our day, just as much as it challenged family, temple and empire in Jesus' day. He might as well have said, "I come to divide parishioner against priest, parish against diocese, national church against Worldwide Anglican Communion." And the question we

have to ask ourselves in the light of today's gospel lesson is whether we have made an idol of our institutions, or of unity itself, at the expense of the gospel.

Our churches, our nation and our world are, for instance, in the middle of great and sometimes violent debates about human sexuality. In the Episcopal Church, the issue is nearly settled, at least for now, and although we hear daily bad news from around the world about the progress of human rights, it seems clear that our nation is on the same path as our church. Marriage equality is the watchword and touchstone here, but in much of the world the struggle is for the right of sexual minorities to live in peace, or even simply to live at all. But even among people here who see and embrace a future of real equality, the argument is often raised that it is too much too soon, that the change called for is too radical and too fast, that it will be too disruptive right now – in other words, that peace is more important than justice.

But that is not what Jesus, our “Prince of Peace,” tells us. The gospel, the reign of God, he says, is inevitably disruptive to the institutions and social structures that stand in its way. The world God intends for us is a world where all are fed and sheltered, welcomed and loved equally, and the accomplishing of the reign of God must inevitably either trample or transform all that stands in its way.

Jesus' own mother (with whom Jesus, scripture tells us, had a sometimes conflicted relationship) foresaw this before he was born. Her song as she carries

the Prince of Peace in her womb, the one we call the Magnificat, is a ballad of social upheaval – of the mighty being cast down and the lowly being raised up; the hungry being fed and the rich being sent away empty.

It is interesting to me that, unlike Mary's song, Jesus' prediction of the disruptiveness of his message focuses not on the struggles between the powerful and the powerless; not on the upheaval of empire and church, but on the disruption his words will bring to our closest relationships: to brothers and sisters, to parents and children, to spouses and partners.

I think that is because it is in our most intimate relationships that the reign of God has the greatest possibility of breaking in, and the most power for transformation. Our governments and institutions, even when nominally Christian, still behave like governments and institutions, concerned primarily with power and self-preservation. It is our individual relationships that, when illumined by the gospel, are most able to both resemble and spread the reign of God.

And we all know stories, perhaps even have experiences of close relationships being tested, strained to the breaking point by differences about the way to live, and to love, and to stand in the world, that in the end, became stronger, more loving, more honest and more generous by confronting and suffering and surviving that strain, those conflicts.

But we also know relationships, families, friendships, that have been broken apart by those differences, possibly never to be mended. That is the sword that Jesus brings, and the hard truth of this gospel lesson is that Jesus is right – the transformation of the world will, until it is accomplished, bring sorrow along with joy, division as well as reconciliation, both pain and healing.

We all know this from experience. But if it makes us uncomfortable to hear Jesus say it so directly, well, maybe that is because our hearts are already filled with the longing to be in the world to which we are called, the world beyond sorrow, division and pain. Let us pray that the longing of our hearts makes us zealous to bring that world into being quickly and for all.

There is a hymn in our hymnal by William Alexander Percy that begins, “They cast their nets in Galilee,” (you can find it at number 661) It is about Jesus’ followers and their encounters with the Peace of God that “Filled their hearts brimful and broke them too.” The final stanza has, like today’s gospel lesson, always disturbed me as much as it drew me:

The peace of God, it is no peace,
but strife closed in the sod,
Yet let us pray for but one thing --
the marvelous peace of God.

Amen.