

A Sermon from All Saints' Episcopal Church, Briarcliff Manor, New York
Preached by the Rev. Timothy E. Schenck, Rector on June 22, 2008 (Proper 7A)
Based on Matthew 10:24-39

“Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace but a sword.” “I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law.”

What? That doesn't sound like the warm and fuzzy Jesus I want to believe in. The one I learned about in Sunday School. The one who preaches peace and heals the sick and blesses the little children. “Jesus loves me, this I know for the Bible tells me so.” True, but the Bible also tells us that Jesus did not come to bring peace and that he came to set a man against his father. At least Father's Day was *last* weekend.

But I admit this wasn't exactly the gospel passage I was hoping for on “Picnic Sunday.” I would have taken almost anything else – the Good Shepherd; a nice agricultural parable – the mustard seed perhaps; anything with feasting like the Wedding at Cana. But sometimes Jesus has to go to great lengths to get our attention. Which is part of the message here. Jesus isn't actually a sword-wielding ninja or a proponent of dysfunctional family life. (You don't hear the “family values” crowd citing *this* passage.) But Jesus is a master communicator and his use of hyperbole to drive home a point is an effective, if often misunderstood, rhetorical device. These seemingly out of character phrases are meant to grab our attention; to make us stand up and notice. We, just like the first disciples, can be a pretty distracted people and so Jesus' intention is to shake us out of our apathy. “Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace but a sword.” So, does Jesus have your attention yet?

Some context here is helpful: You'll recall from last week's gospel that Jesus had just sent forth the 12 apostles to preach the good news of the kingdom, to heal the sick and raise the dead in his name. They were probably bursting with energy and idealism, ready to save the world. This morning's passage is a reality check. Go forth with zeal but remember that this is not an easy assignment. It is not for the faint of heart. You will face slander and persecution and only the utmost dedication to your faith will see you through.

For us, as for the twelve, this passage is a good reminder about the nature of our relationship with Jesus. Jesus isn't like a genie that we can unleash at our command whenever it's convenient, get our three wishes granted, and then demand that he return to the bottle. Who's calling who “master” in this relationship? You may well *dream* of Genie but the reality is that you're getting Jesus. And just as I wasn't thrilled to get this passage today, Jesus has a tendency to jump into situations and demand our attention. Often at the most inconvenient times. And we want to protest and say, “You know this isn't really a good time. Can I call you back?” But it just never quite works that way.

Because ours isn't a faith of convenience but a faith of discipleship. And Jesus' message here is that faith must come above all else. Everything in this life is secondary to following God. Love of country, love of sports, love of money, love of self, even love of family. Jesus goes to dramatic lengths to drive this point across because we so often struggle with it. Again, when he says that he has "come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law," he's not advocating for family strife. But he is boldly proclaiming the importance of placing God at the pinnacle of your life's priorities.

Which can be tough to swallow. Especially if you've ever been asked, as I have, "Dad, who do you love more, me or God?" It's a question that breaks your heart because it is so often through my children that I glimpse God. And occasionally the devil. But it's a question that gets right to the heart of this whole issue. Is God *really* first? Or are we just paying God lip service while emphasizing all those other things that keep us from the love of God. It's a slippery slope.

In response to this question, I told Zack that our job is to love God first and then to love one another. It's not about who we love more but that we love as much as we can. Without God's love for us there would be no love for a spouse or a child or a parent. Which doesn't entirely answer the question. But I thought it was a pretty good start to what's really a life-long conversation. Especially since it took place while he was brushing his teeth.

What I didn't say is that regardless of what I think or say, everyone must eventually follow God in his or her own way. And that is sometimes at odds with the prevailing culture or even your own family. Recent graduates, and parents of recent graduates, take note. Following your own calling may not mesh with the call others perceive and project upon you. And that can cause family or societal angst.

"Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me." Perhaps Zack's bedtime stall tactic is what Jesus is really asking us. Who do you love more, your money or God? Who do you love more, your own comfort and security, or God? Who do you love more, life's pleasures or God? None of these things are bad unto themselves. They just need to be placed into their proper context. And so the image of Jesus loudly getting our attention with these images of the raised sword and parent pit against child is reduced to a whisper. Who do you love more?

Following Jesus requires sacrifice. That's the underlying message to the disciples in this passage. To pick up that cross – not just to lift it off the ground a bit but to really pick it up and heave it over your shoulder – takes great effort. It takes commitment and passion and single mindedness. And Jesus is upfront about this – the reality of the Christian faith isn't left to the fine print. We were never promised a rose garden. It's the Garden of Gethsemane that looms. But the good news is that when we love God with heart and mind and soul Jesus abides among us and with us and in us.