

Sermon 8.14.16

Pastor Josh Ferris

Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Year C

1 John 3:1-3, 11-18 | Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16 | **Luke 12:49-56**

One of the first things we're taught in seminary is that when it comes to the Bible, context matters. When we read a passage that doesn't make sense, or that seems confusing or contradictory, the more we can learn about its context, the better we can understand it.

Let me give you an example.

If you've been at Holy Trinity for a little while, you probably know that I'm an Eagles fan. My dad is an Eagles fan, my daughter will be an Eagles fan, and I can definitely find a few passages from scripture – taken *out* of context – to support the notion that *God* is an Eagles fan (looking at you, Isaiah 40:31). Don't think about that too hard, just stay with me.

So if you ever hear me say, "I'm cheering for the New York Giants," it will immediately catch your attention. You'll probably be confused, since such a ridiculous statement is totally out of character and contradicts everything you know about me. But with the right context, it might make sense – like if, for instance, the Giants are playing the Dallas Cowboys that week. Learning more and getting some context can often make sense out of things that are confusing. That's certainly the case with the Bible.

Take our reading from Luke this morning, where Jesus says things that seem very *unJesuslike*. He spoke of bringing fire to the earth, about splitting apart families. He said, "Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division!" (Luke 12:51) These words don't sound much like Jesus, and they even seem to contradict other things that he said and taught.

Like when the angels sang to the shepherds at Jesus' birth, proclaiming *peace* to those God favors. (2:14) Or when Jesus told people to go in *peace* after he healed and forgave them. (7:50, 8:48). Or when he appeared to the disciples after the resurrection, saying *peace* be with you. (24:36) *Everyone* knows that Jesus is about peace and reconciliation.

So why did he say that he didn't come to bring peace, but rather division?

We need some context.

You see, in the first century world, following Jesus came with a cost. A huge cost. To follow Jesus was to question the religious, economic, and political customs, traditions, and requirements that held society together. Following Jesus meant caring for the poor and powerless, and speaking out against the unjust powers of the world. Following Jesus meant turning the social order upside down and caring about people more than money or power. Following Jesus meant that you believed a hillbilly rabbi from the middle of nowhere who hung out with prostitutes, peasants, and poor folk was the Messiah. That *he* was Lord, and *not* the Emperor. Family members and friends would have viewed following Jesus as you turning your back on your heritage, your family, your nation, and your God to follow a man who preached love and forgiveness rather than strength and force, who looked *nothing* like what the culture thought was powerful or important, and who was crucified as an enemy of the state.

And as a result, following Jesus meant that you would be pressured by friends and family into giving up your newfound faith, publicly shamed for embracing such indecency, shunned by most decent people, and potentially disowned by those you love. This is what Jesus meant when he said that families would be divided because of him. Following Jesus will create

division, because not everyone embraces the Good News of the Gospel when they hear it. Some people reject or ignore it. Some hear it as bad news. Some just think it's a fairy tale.

Thankfully today's world is much different, and we live in a country where we can worship Jesus without fear. But even today, faith in Jesus still brings division. When I was a chaplain at Thomas Jefferson Hospital, I met a young Christian woman from Pakistan who had to hide her faith. She told me how she and her family had to flee Pakistan for fear of being persecuted for their faith. Just this week I heard the story of a young woman here in the U.S. who was disowned by her family and kicked out of the house because she became a Christian.

Faith can strain our relationships. Some of us are married to people who don't believe in Jesus, we have friends who don't believe in Jesus, we work with people who don't believe in Jesus, and it can sometimes cause division and make us stick out. Some of us even have family members who think we're not 'real Christians' because we love gay people and ordain women and interpret the Bible differently. That hurts, and thank God we have each other.

My parents taught me that there are two things you don't talk about at the dinner table: religion and politics. Because they divide people. And according to Jesus, that isn't new.

But here's what we need to hear this morning: some things are worth being divided over. Growing up, people often told me "don't rock the boat." But some things matter enough that we *should* rock the boat. Even if it brings division. Even if it creates some conflict. Because God cares about justice and righteousness more than false peace and unity.

When evil is at work, when sin is called wise or true or good, when hate is encouraged, then division is needed and necessary. Our faith in Jesus *should* cause us to be divided against such things. Our failure to speak against injustice and our inaction in the face of wrongdoing is

itself evil, and it makes us complicit. Jesus loves peace, but not peace at any cost. (Jeremiah 8:11) Not false peace that silences some voices or ignores injustice. True peace – God’s peace – comes from faith and justice and righteousness. (John 14:27)

During the 1960s, as the Civil Rights movement was changing our nation, there were many white Christians who demanded that black people stop marching, stop interrupting traffic, stop demanding their rights, stop creating unrest and division and making people uncomfortable. And as Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. sat in jail, this is what he wrote:

“I must confess that over the last few years I have been gravely disappointed with the white moderate. I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that [our] greatest stumbling block in the stride toward freedom is not the White Citizen’s Council-er or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate who is more devoted to ‘order’ than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice; who lives by the myth of time and who constantly advises [us] to wait until a ‘more convenient season.’”

Even today, as our black neighbors have taken to the streets to protest across our nation, calling out for help amidst racial inequality and instances of police brutality that have been vindicated by a report released just this past week by the Department of Justice, even today many Christian people – most of whom are largely unaffected by the very issues being protested – have critiqued and criticized and called for peace, for an end to protests, an end to unrest, for voices to be silenced and people to be calm and to stop rocking the boat.

But sometimes division is exactly what’s needed. Sometimes righteousness demands it. Love for our neighbor insists on it. Faithfully following Jesus requires it. Justice means more than false peace or fake unity. It means lifting our voices and doing something when we see

evil. And it means listening and learning when other people – especially people who are different from us – are lifting *their* voices to do the same.

There are times when division is a sign of God's Spirit at work.

There are times when we are called to be God's agents of division.

And that's not easy. Sometimes it will cost you. Not everyone wants justice, righteousness, real peace, or God's kingdom to come, and some people have become comfortable and prosperous under broken and evil systems in our world. Being an agent of God's division might make you stand out at work, when you refuse to do what you know is wrong. It might make you stand out at school, when you stand up for the bullied classmate and refuse to tell *that* joke and point out when things are wrong. It might make you stick out amongst your friends and family. It might even cause division around the dinner table.

But some things are worth being divided over.

Our world needs God's agents of division. Our country needs them. We have more children living in poverty and hunger than any other developed nation in the world. The legacy of racism continues to live on. And we don't need a peace that sweeps those things under the rug, we need God's agents of division who will work for justice!

Right now our political candidates are preying on fear, demonizing entire groups of people, insulting anyone who disagrees, and inciting violence. Some leaders have advocated for putting our Muslim neighbors in a registry and closing our borders to desperate children and families who are seeking asylum from gangs, violence, war, and terror, and we don't need false peace or forced unity, we need God's agents of division who will work to love and listen and to proclaim the dignity of all people and speak out against hate and bigotry in all forms!

Some things are worth being divided over. Some things are more important than keeping calm. God is calling us to true peace, positive peace, *God's peace*. Not just peace, but restoration. Not just peace, but justice. Not just peace, but righteousness and reconciliation and healing and wholeness for all people. So may God give us strength to rock the boat, and to be God's agents of division. And may we know God's hope and joy, even when following Jesus costs us something. Amen.