

Isaiah 5:1-7
Psalm 80:1-2, 8-18
Hebrews 11:29-12:2
Luke 12:49-56

Each one of us is here this morning because of our belief in or our search for Jesus. We come to hear scripture. We come to sing hymns of gratitude, joy and praise to God and to Jesus. We come to celebrate the Holy Eucharist which is the way Jesus asked his followers to remember him. We see Jesus as love personified. We see Jesus as our savior. We see Jesus as a window into understanding the nature of God. The Jesus that we have come to spend time with this morning in our worship service is not the Jesus that we hear about in our Gospel lesson this morning. We know Jesus to be the Prince of Peace not the Dean of Division. We do not see Jesus as the Great Divider. We see Jesus as the Great Healer. So what is Jesus trying to share with us this morning that will help us to better understand the nature of his mission and the fallout that it will cause? Jesus is known as the Prince of Peace and, yet, he is quite clearly telling his followers and us that he has not come to bring peace to the earth, but rather division. So what does he mean by that? And why would he bring division?

We have seen Jesus from the beginning of his ministry at the end of his time of temptation in the desert to the current time. We have witnessed him healing many people...the blind, the lame, and the leper. We know him to be a healer of physical ailments. We have also heard about his generosity and his ability to provide sustenance to those following him when he feeds 5,000 people with 2 fish and 5 loaves of bread. We know so many positive things about Jesus and his ministry. Why is he now talking about fomenting division as he approaches Jerusalem?

First of all, Jesus is a change agent...and a change agent of the greatest power and magnitude. He's not going to settle for the status quo. Little by little, he introduces to his followers new ways of thinking about things and new ways of behaving. He tells them that they are to forgive people who trespass against them...not search for ways to get even or to fight back. He takes

care of people's needs when they are presented to him without much concern about where such care occurs. Twice he heals someone in a synagogue on the sabbath; once was a man possessed by evil spirits and the other time was when he cured a woman of being bent over so badly that she could hardly stand. She had been that way for eighteen years and Jesus released her on the spot. The leaders of the synagogue in both instances were offended because Jesus had done 'work' on the sabbath which is forbidden of faithful Jewish people. Jesus is breaking the rules...or at least...the man-made rules.

As Jesus continued in his ministry he demonstrated over and over again that he cared more about the welfare of the person standing in front of him asking for relief than he did for the rules of the synagogue. Those rules had been created to show people the proper way to show deference and respect to God. Jesus showed us repeatedly that he cared more about healing the person in front of him than he cared about avoiding offending God. For people in the synagogue who took the rituals there seriously, Jesus' actions were a great offense. This kind of thing happened repeatedly as Jesus tried to teach people what was most important to God. Jesus wasn't trying to offend the respectful and religious Jews who was merely trying to do what they thought was the appropriate way to approach God and to show reverence to God. Jesus was teaching them about God's priorities which were different from their own. As Jesus healed one person after another, word of him spread among the people. As the word spread and the stories about his powers of healing spread and his challenges to the high priests and scribes and the Temple were repeated, people began to take sides.

That's division, folks.

As Jesus went through his ministry, he did and said many things that the law-abiding, devout Jew found questionable if not downright offensive and disrespectful to God. When, in fact, Jesus was actually demonstrating to them what God thought was most important. In this passage that we heard this morning, Jesus sounds more like John the Baptist than like the Jesus we think we know; these words spoken by Jesus assert that He has not come to validate human

institutions and their values but to initiate God's radical will. The Jewish people have wandered so far away from their first encounters with God that their rituals designed to honor God are hardly recognizable.

Jesus is bringing change and change is upsetting to human beings. Jesus' words about causing divisions between father and son; mother and daughter; mother-in-law and daughter-in-law speak to the disruption of family relationships which in turn threatens the entire social structure in which all of them live. As Jesus begins to establish new ways of keeping God's covenant with the Chosen People, some of the Jewish people understood what he was doing and others thought he was being sacrilegious in the worst possible way. Jesus was also threatening the very structure of the household which was regarded as a microcosm of society and social reality. The household was the basic building block of society and should not be tampered with in any way. By claiming to bring not peace but division and then illustrating such divisions in terms of the household, the text declares that Jesus' mission in coming to us is not the affirmation of the current social status quo but means its complete obliteration. The prospect of social structures falling into complete disarray is not only scary...it's downright terrifying.

By the time Jesus arrived, the Jewish people had spent thousands of years and multiple generations organizing and building their social structure and they do not want to see it destroyed...or even tampered with. And as human beings are prone to do, those rituals and social structures have been corrupted over the years. This imagery of household divisions that Jesus presents to them carries with it the notion of complete collapse of current structures as the society is built on the unit of the family as the basic building block. Note, too, that the divisions depicted in Jesus' statement about what's coming are divisions that are generational, so that no longer will one's identity, vocation, allegiance and status automatically be predetermined by family ties. Instead, they will be determined by one's positive or negative stance toward Jesus. There will be no more riding on the previous generations' coattails in order to have an elevated and wealthy position in society. This imagery of household divisions

carries with it the notion of complete collapse of current structures. The prospect of such a change in societal structure is absolutely terrifying especially to the people who are currently at the top of the social ladder. Just imagine what would happen in our own society!! What Jesus is saying and doing is very frightening. He is inviting the complete destruction of society as it exists and people know it. Jesus did not come to validate the social values and realities that human beings...the Jewish nation in particular...had constructed. Such social realities and values have a propensity to seek a harmony that favors those who hold positions of power at the expense of those who are expendable and powerless. Jesus' missional agendas of compassion, mercy and justice shatters such a status quo.

This change in interpretation...this statement from Jesus that 'you're doing it wrong!' was the source of passionate disagreement among many God-fearing and religious Jews. Jesus was challenging everything they held dear in their rituals and their customs and their ways of trying to do what they believed God wanted them to do. Jesus' challenges to the status quo were an affront to them, but not everyone disagreed with Jesus. Some people saw the majesty in what Jesus was teaching. Both their hearts and their minds were touched significantly. Once they 'saw the light' so to speak, they didn't want to go back to the old ways of doing things. They saw that somehow these rituals and customs had been diluted and misunderstood so profoundly that they barely resembled what God had provided originally. And people began to take sides. That's the beginning of division.

Jesus' emphatic denial that he came to bring peace also needs to be considered in relationship to the divine peace that is inaugurated through his presence on earth. The divinely wrought peace that Jesus inaugurates and bestows involves the establishment of proper relationships of mercy, compassion, and justice between God and humanity. *Let me say that again.* And we are all aware that proper relationships of mercy, compassion and justice between God and humanity is very hard to establish. Human beings seem not to be programmed in that way.

What Jesus is saying and doing is very frightening. He's inviting the complete destruction of society and people know it. It's not just frightening. It's terrifying. Small wonder Jesus says to all who are gathered around him as we heard last week: "Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom. Sell your possessions and give alms. Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.