

THE TWELFTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST
(Proper 15)
August 15, 2010 C

Luke 12:49-56

Today's gospel just doesn't sound right, does it? What's up with Jesus asking, "Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division." Don't we have enough division on earth as it is? We need all the spiritual help we can get when it comes to being a community of Jesus' followers. Why in the world would Jesus say that he came to cause division within a family? God knows the divisions which already exist in so many families struggling with all sorts of things. Are these really the words of Jesus or were they put in Jesus' mouth by Luke and his companions? What was going on among the early followers of Jesus and how did **they** hear this message?

First, a quick contemporary story to help *create a feeling* of division prevalent among many Jewish families at the time when Luke first wrote these words.

Some years ago, I met with a young, wonderful couple preparing for marriage. The man was Jewish. The woman was Christian. They wanted to find a creative way to bring both religious traditions into their wedding service. They had contacted a rabbi. And the two of us were all set to do the wedding together, that is, until the groom told his father. The young groom had tears streaming down his face when he told me that his father adamantly refused to come to his son's wedding if he was going to be married in the presence of a priest. And if that was not enough, the father told his son in no uncertain terms that if he went through with the wedding as planned, as far as he was concerned, his son would be as good as dead in his eyes. He would disown him and want nothing to do with him ever again. He felt so strong about his Jewish family identity that he would not compromise his beliefs and feelings. He would rather create division in his family, even disowning his son, than be open to the mystery and gift of his son's relationship to his fiancé and how they wished to celebrated their commitment in the presence of God.

This is the sort of stuff the early Jewish followers of Jesus faced within their households and among their family members. There was much stress and tension in many Jewish families in Luke's time for those who became followers of Jesus. They knew that to follow Jesus meant facing stress and tension and rejection from family members they loved. They knew what it was like to take up the cross for Christ's sake. They knew what it was like living in its shadow. Following Jesus threatened the very fabric of the social structure of their society and its definition of 'family values.'

In a reflection on this text, Barbara Brown Taylor, in her book entitled *Gospel Medicine*, says that Jesus sought to redefine what family means for those who embrace the message of God's kingdom. "For (Jesus), family was not a matter of whose chromosomes you carry around inside of you but whose image you are created in." Family in the kingdom of God is defined by the one God who was served and the good news in this family system, says Barbara Brown Taylor, is that "the gospel is not a flashlight but a fire. It can warm and it can burn."

Jesus is on the road to Jerusalem. It's a pretty stressful time for him as he says in the opening lines of today's gospel: "I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what stress I am under until it is completed." He knows that his time is growing short in what he can do and he wants so much to motivate his followers to take seriously the coming of the reign or rule of God we call the kingdom. It was hard for them as it is for us to grasp that it's not a place or political ideology but a vision and attitude toward life embodied in his person and message which Jesus wants his followers to passionately make their own. The kingdom was present with him and its power was already at work in the world through him, but his followers just don't seem to have the fire and passion he'd like them to have. It's why he urges his followers to be real about who they are and not be hypocrites. His message has an 'edge' to it. Jesus' seems to be a bit impatient or frustrated in much the same way some of us might be when something important is delaying us or holding us back from some unfinished business we know we need to tend to and the time is slipping by. Jesus is urging his followers to be real about who they are, especially when it comes to making God's kingdom a priority in their lives that's reflected in how they live, including the choices they make each day in all aspects of living.

I took a break on Friday while working on this sermon and went to pay a visit to see two special friends of mine: Renee and Marvin Arrington at The Little Willie Center in West Greenville. For those of you new to the area, The Little Willie Center serves youth ages 3 to 17, who would otherwise be unsupervised during after school hours. Mrs. Arrington started this service 20 years ago. Her son, Marvin, works passionately to financially keep afloat this non-profit agency whose mission is to build the sort of family structure rooted and grounded in the vision of God's kingdom. The after school tutoring and mentoring program reached over a hundred and fifty youth and their families last school year. Mrs. Arrington proudly smiled as she shared with me that every single child who participated in last year's program was promoted to the next grade at the end of year! While it's not on the list of the many 'Pathways to Service' you've received in the mail and can sign-up for at the Ministry Fair on Homecoming Sunday (found on our website in the August Epistle), it's a very valuable stewardship investment of time and talent. Renee and Marvin truly seek God's kingdom and live with a deep trust and conviction, that God places each of us where we are meant to be in order to get God's work done.

A framed poem in the midst of the Center caught my attention, so much so, that I stayed after our meeting to scribble it on a piece of paper. Reading the poem in a space which intentionally protects kids from risk factors such as substance abuse, physical or sexual abuse, low self-esteem or learning difficulties, opened my eyes to how the kingdom of God breaks into our lives in unexpected places where people living with stress and tensions face great challenges, but never give up on seeking first God's kingdom with real openness and trust, as I witness in the passion and fire of this mother and son.

The poem is called Don't Quit and here's an excerpt:

When things go wrong, as they sometimes will, When the road you're trudging seems all uphill, When the funds are low, and the debts are high, And you want to smile, but you have to sigh, When care is pressing you down a bit, Rest if you must, but don't you quit. Life is queer with its twists and turns, As everyone of us sometimes learns...

"Success is failure turned inside out, The silver tint of the clouds of doubt, And you never can tell how close you are, It may be near when it seems so far; So stick to the fight when you're hardest hit, It's when things seem worse, that you must not quit."

The mystery of God's kingdom continually surprises us, especially when we face the stress and tension and conflicts of life with openness and trust in God's abiding presence and healing power. And the line in that poem at The Little Willie Center that spoke loudly and clearly to me of this mystery is:

"You never can tell how close you are, It may be near when it seems so far."

Amen.

*Bob Hudak
St. Paul's Episcopal Church
Greenville, NC*