

Grace, mercy, and peace to you in the name of Jesus Christ.

“Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace but a sword. For 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, and one’s foes will be members of one’s own household.” (Matt. 10:34-36)

Well, happy Father’s Day! How’s that for a Father’s Day text? I’ve just come back from nine days spent very much focused on family, so today’s Gospel reading is striking close to home for me. This is a tough text, because I love my family, even after a week in the same house with my mother and sisters. And I know you love your families too. And churches? Churches especially love families. The more, the merrier. Some of our fellow Christians have for years promoted “family values” as one of the central principles of the faith. Recently, one prominent elected official, who is Christian, claimed that God wants us to prioritize our families over our other relationships. But is that kind of focus on the family really Christian? Because here is Jesus in our reading this morning sounding as far from family friendly as you could imagine. And that’s because it turns out Jesus had a problem with family values.

To understand why, it helps to know that while we love families in our time and place, in the ancient world families were even more revered. They were central to a person’s identity and means of survival. People without families were vulnerable. That’s why the early church gave special attention to widows and orphans, those who had no families to support them. But families also demanded loyalty, and here was the rub for Jesus. As it is with anything that God has given us, families can become idols, objects of reverence and attention that displace God and our neighbor, the object of the two greatest commandments. And that is baked into our culture. We have a saying that reflects this: “blood is thicker than water.” I don’t hear it used a lot anymore, but it means that family ties are stronger than religious ones, that connections to our “blood relations” trump our baptismal connections to the church. And you’ve heard people say, for instance, that they would do anything for their children, or for their parents. Maybe *you’ve* said it, or at least thought it. I certainly have. But would you do anything for somebody *else’s* children, or somebody *else’s* parents? Be honest. You wouldn’t. Me neither. Jesus knows this, and this is precisely his problem with our family values. The problem is not that we love and care for our children and our parents. Those are good and blessed things to do. The problem is that we are not willing to extend that same care to others. Charity begins at home, don’t you know. God helps those who help themselves. We’ve got a raft of common-sense arguments to limit our responsibility and attention.

Now, I realize of course that many families are dysfunctional, that many children are not cared for as they ought to be, and that children and parents become estranged and disconnected. But the fact that we label them as dysfunctional reflects our expectation that they ought to be functional, that we hold families in high regard, in theory at least. It also reflects our annoyance that those who don’t care for their families create a burden for the rest of us that we’d rather not bear.

This leads us to the other difficult thing in the quote I started with, that Jesus has not come to bring peace, but conflict. Jesus’ problem with peace is the same as his problem with family values. It’s not that he doesn’t want us to be at peace with each other. It’s that he doesn’t want the kind of peace that we usually mean when we say we want peace. The kind of peace that

doesn't rock the boat, that doesn't "cause trouble." The Roman occupiers of Jesus' homeland were famous for that kind of peace. It was known as the *Pax Romana*, the Roman Peace. This wasn't the kind of peace that comes with freedom and prosperity, at least not for most people under Roman rule. It's the kind of peace that lets you live if you do what you're told, that will allow you to eke out an existence as long as you provide those in power with as much as they can squeeze out of you. If you are one of the people benefitting from that kind of an arrangement, of course you don't want people rocking your boat or causing trouble. But if you are one of the many who are being squeezed, who are rocking the boat because they are in the water in danger of, then you will recognize that true peace cannot be had where injustice and oppression rule. "No justice, no peace," you will hear civil rights protesters chant. If that offends you, it might be worth examining how you benefit from things as they are. It might also be worth asking what kind of peace it is that you really want, or at least would be satisfied with. Jesus is *not* satisfied with that kind of peace, though, and that can come as something of a shock to the system, if we are able to hear it.

We have now set the stage for how Jesus means to address the condition we find ourselves in. And that is the third problematic thing he says here in this reading: "Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it." It's a literal translation, but it doesn't quite convey the meaning. It really means that those who imagine that they have attained life, "the good life," as it were, life imagined by the kind of family values and peace that we desire, are missing the true life that God created us for and that Jesus is now calling us back to. The solution is to follow him in the way of the cross, to "take up our own crosses, and follow him." And that sounds like a horrible solution to us. Of course it does. But it's not that Jesus would have us seek our own deaths. Far from it. It's just that he doesn't want us to confuse the compromised life we now live with the life that God intends for us. And it's that he doesn't want us to fear those who would be happy to get rid of us when we dare to challenge the arrangements that we now live under, which is exactly what he was saying earlier in the reading.

What seems horrible and impossible to our common-sense selves, Jesus himself lives out in his passion, death, and resurrection, and in doing so he disarms all the forces that defy God with their empty promises about putting ourselves and our loved ones first. In their place he gives new and better promises and draws us into a new and better life. And that's where Paul is leading us and the Roman Christians in our second reading this morning. Baptism into Christ is baptism into death, death to the compromised life we now live, the life that we confuse with the life that God wants for us. But because it is *Christ's* death we are baptized into, the way of the cross that we are invited into turns out to be the way to life that really is life. Buried with Christ in baptism we are also raised to a new life and reborn into the family of God, a family that doesn't limit itself to blood relations, but willingly and joyfully embraces all who are put in our path. It also brings true peace, peace that will not abide injustice and exploitation but seeks the good of all. This is Good News that can be hard to believe, because it is so often at odds with the world as we experience it. And here we might make a connection to the Juneteenth celebration just past, the holiday that commemorates the news brought to enslaved people in Galveston, Texas that they were now free. It must have been hard to believe, but it was true. May we also trust the counterintuitive promises of God for Jesus' sake, the promises that God's reign really is near, and that Jesus has conquered the powers of sin, death, and evil. And may the remarkable peace that it brings, the peace of God that passes all understanding, keep our hearts and our minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.