



Pentecost 12 – Year C – 2010

Text: Luke 12:49-56

**Homily given at St. John's Cobble Hill – Sunday August 15<sup>th</sup> 2010.**

Using resources by Barbara Brown Taylor, John Shea, and Richard Rohr.

Let us pray:

Gracious God, whose desire is that all the peoples of the world should be one human family, living together in harmony:

Guide us when we are in conflict with one another; help us to be energized by what unites us, rather than what divides us, so that we may be part of bringing about your reign in our world; in the name of your Beloved, our Saviour, Jesus Christ. Amen.

I was coming back on the ferry from Vancouver earlier this week, after having been given the honour of taking the memorial service for Bill Redfern, the father of one of our parishioners, Michelle. And while I was coming home on the ferry, I found myself having a conversation with someone about a variety of topics -- most of them centring on religion, faith and the church (this person knew I was a priest). Eventually the topic of “families” came up and I was asked about what I thought about the, quote: “breakdown of the family today” and whether or not I as a member of the clergy, saw certain factors that contributed to this. I wasn't really sure how to answer that but we eventually ended up drifting into the subject-area of “family values.”

What are family values anyway? And why do people seem to be so worried about them? I'm not sure if it is as popular a subject today as it was a few years ago, but we used hear a lot about “family values” on T.V. talk shows, and they would always be sure to come up during political elections – especially in the U.S. The person I was talking to thought that people today are still in fact, blaming the breakdown of the family for the growing list of our social problems: for crime and unemployment, for moral disillusionment and mental illness. The family is where children learn values, people say. If children do not learn about honesty, hard work, responsibility, and faith from their mothers and fathers, chances are that no one else will be able to teach them those things. As Barbara Brown Taylor says: “When families break down, values break down. And when values break down, families break down – is how people tend to view it! So everyone is all for “family values,” although no one can say what that means, exactly.

Jesus, unfortunately, can, and what he says in that regard is a sure sign that he could never have won a political election – at least if he said it the way we heard him say it in today's gospel reading. “From now on five in one household will be divided,” he says, and he goes on to outline the feuds: father and son against each other, mother and daughter against each other, son's wife and son's mother at each other's throats—a





whole house full of slamming doors and meals swallowed in stony silence—all because of Jesus.

It is the kind of statement that makes Christians wonder if they are hearing right. Is this really Jesus? Is this the prince of peace who taught us to love our enemies, the gentle shepherd who taught us to turn the other cheek? It is the kind of statement that makes you wish someone had forgotten to write it down, or that someone at least had decided to edit it out, but even if we did not have it in Luke's Gospel (that we heard it in today), we would still have it in Matthew's, where he says it this way: "Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword" we read in Matthew, chapter 10, verse 34.

What are we to make of such a harsh pronouncement, and where, please, is the good news in it? Let Jesus divide us from our (quote-un-quote) "enemies", by all means—from those who hit and hurt and lie and steal, from those who corrupt and destroy the creatures of God—but from our families? From our own parents and our own children, the very people who have taught us what little we know about the love and forgiveness of God?

Now it also needs to be said that some people never learned those things at home, and they, actually, may be in the best position to understand what Jesus is talking about here. They know that being related to someone by blood is no guarantee of love or forgiveness, and sometimes the only way to save your life is to lose your family, closing the door on them and never looking back. Sadly, that happens in some families.

But Jesus is not talking about the ordinary cruelties of family life, as devastating as they can be. He is talking very specifically about the divisions that occur between parents and children, brothers and sisters, husbands and wives, when he walks into their lives. He is talking about what happens to family loyalty when he asks them to put God first in their lives. He is talking about what happens to family harmony when he asks them to choose whom they will follow.

Try this image on for a moment from Barbara Brown Taylor: "There they are sitting around the dining room table one night, minding their own business, when the gospel falls like a sword across their dining room table and quivers there, with half the roast on one side and half on the other, green beans everywhere. Some of those sitting around the table are struck to the heart. They want to pull the sword out and run straight into the street with it, swinging it above their heads and making perfect strangers listen to what just happened to them.

Others want to clean up the mess and get on with supper. Sure, it is the gospel, but there is no reason to get all upset about it. Being a good Christian is not all that different





from being a good citizen, after all. You just stay out of trouble and be nice to your neighbours and say your prayers at night. There is absolutely no reason to go make a spectacle of yourself.

And then there is always the family member who does not see a thing, who does not believe in [gospel]-swords at all and who goes right on eating as if nothing ever happened, muttering under his breath about how everyone in this house is stark raving mad.

Do you know other stories like that? Like the parents who raise their children to be doctors and lawyers and have almost succeeded when the last one announces she wants to be a minister, and their faces fall but she goes to seminary anyway, and when they draw up their wills she is not in them? Or like the grown children who find out how much money their elderly parents are giving away to a church-run orphanage and who have mom and dad declared mentally incompetent in order to protect their own inheritance? Or like the mother who will not speak to her two adult children because one left the church of his youth for a place where he speaks in tongues and the other refuses to go to church at all?

What is so disturbing about these stories is that Jesus does not say they should not be so. He says, in fact, that they are inevitable, that the gospel is inherently divisive and that we should not be surprised when we fight [or are in disagreement] about it. God's word is "like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces," says the prophet Jeremiah (23:29), and Jesus does not disagree with him. "Do you think I have come to bring peace on earth? No, I tell you, but rather division!"

Now on the one hand, you have to remember where Jesus was when he said that and what was going on at this point in his life. He was on the road to Jerusalem, the city of his certain death, and it was tearing him up inside. "I have a baptism with which to be baptized," he says, "and what stress I am under until it is completed!" He was in a tightening vice, and he had no sympathy for people who tried to squirm out of it themselves, using their family responsibilities as reasons why they could not follow him.

"Let me first go and bury my father," someone asked him. The answer was no. "Let me first say farewell to those at my home," said another, and again the answer was no. Loyalty to God is not one allegiance to be juggled along with all the rest. It is primary. It is not negotiable. It is a matter of life and death, although sometimes you have to be on the road to Jerusalem before you can see it that way.

But Jesus did not become someone else on that road. He did not suddenly change from gentle shepherd to gleaming sword once Jerusalem appeared on the horizon. His ambivalence about his own family was apparent long before that. Way back when he





was still a baby, old Simeon took him from his mother's arms and told her what he saw in his eyes. "This child is destined for the falling and rising of many in Israel." He said to her, "and a sword will pierce your own soul too." (Luke 2:34-35).

But perhaps the most telling encounter came later, when his mother and his brothers came to see him in one of the towns where he was teaching but could not reach him because of all the people. Thinking he would be pleased they were there and that they wanted to see him, he replied: "My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it" (Luke 8:21).

That is, I think, very helpful to us. Jesus did not despise the family, but he did re-define it. For him, family was not a matter of whose chromosomes you carry around inside of you but whose image you are created in.

It was not a matter of who has the same last name or lives at the same address, but who serves the same God, which means that his family became huge—beyond counting—with lepers and tax collectors and Roman centurions in it, with scruffy looking men who smelled of fish and ladies in robes made of gold brocade and hordes of squealing children.

There was no family tree in his Holy Bible. As much as his ancestors may have mattered to him, it was more like a family forest he walked around in (rather than one tree), with relatives collected from all over the place—some from one family and some from another—all of them gathered in one place because of their allegiance to one God. That was the family where they learned what was right and what was wrong, what was worth living for and what was not. Whatever they had or had not learned at their own parent's knees, that family gave them another chance to discover the love and forgiveness they needed to live.

And they squabbled, Oh how they squabbled, and still do—but with Jesus as their Saviour and Guide, they remained a family, his family, the one he lived for and the one he was willing to die for, though it ran a sword through his own mother's soul.

Those are his family values, and while they may well send a shiver down our spines, there is good news here for those with the nerve to hear it. The gospel is not a flashlight but a fire. It can warm and it can burn. The gospel is not a table knife but a sword. It can set free and it can divide. The gospel is not pabulum. It is powerful stuff, powerful enough to challenge the most sacred human ties.

I realize that these stark and conflictual sayings we hear from Jesus in today's gospel sit poorly with contemporary images of God. Our culture seems to prize a God with an infinite capacity for empathy, a God who is "nice." (Bumper stickers tell you that "Jesus





loves you" even if everyone else thinks you're an idiot or worse.") In this gospel, Luke has Jesus challenging this thinking. He offers a glimpse of redemption for a world that is anything but nice, and a world that needs much more than a nice God to redeem it.

If there is a place for 'harmony' in the teaching of Jesus, it is about unity with God and what God is doing in the world and a sense of solidarity with those travelling that path.

'Peace at all costs' has no place here. That kind of harmony covers oppression with respectability and rewards wrong. Instead we face a full scale conflict, taken right into the heart of human formation: the family. The family is being dethroned here from its absolute claims. It is not an invitation to the kind of fanaticism which dislocates people from families like present day cults do. Rather this passion springs from the heart of the human condition. It is the passion for love, for change, for justice, for renewal. These are not the fanatical tenets of a cult, but the foundations of hope. Jesus is confronting the gods of family and warning that this is very dangerous territory. But as frightening as it is, it is not finally to be feared. It was not that Jesus sought to subvert families as such. It was rather that he held up a vision of God and God's agenda for change which often stood in direct conflict with other absolute claims, like wealth, possessions, land, culture, religion and family...

The time for this (for God's reign) is now he says. It is not some case of Jesus coming back at some unannounced time. The Divine is here and now, claiming our allegiance.

The peace of God is worth anything it takes to get there, and anyone knows that the absence of conflict is not peace. The good news is that in Christ, God has given us someone worth fighting (or being in conflict) about, and someone with clout enough to end all our fighting and conflict, for his word is like fire, like a hammer that breaks a rock into pieces. Amen.

Rev. Scott Pittendrigh

