

SAYINGS OF JESUS
THE GREAT DIVORCE

Text on Sunday, October 10, 2010

Luke 12: 49-56

“Do you think I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, but division . . . father against son, mother against daughter.” Why read such a hard saying on this day, while babies’ heads are yet wet? One reason is that we have undertaken to read everything from these four chapters of Luke. If we ignore what doesn’t meet the Hallmark card standard, then our feelings become our guides and gods. Another is, only here does Jesus speak of baptism, an act whose meaning may have wafted away from us even as the tender hairs on our own tiny head dried. But we are not children. We can hear this word about baptism and division.

“I have come not to bring peace, but division.” What can this mean? True, the words might belong not to Jesus but to the early church, angry and fearful as they were after Jerusalem was destroyed by Rome in the year 70. Then Jews divided, some believing Jesus to be the Messiah, but most not. If we leave it at that, and abandon this saying, then *division* keeps its old meaning, like a boxer and his title. Division is just what separates us from them. It is civilization’s oldest story. But unless you like your religion violent, the way the TV preachers blow it, there is no good news in such division. Yet, “I have come not to bring peace, but division.” What can he mean?

From the first, the growth of a child involves, to a very great degree, an increasing capacity for division. In the beginning, there was cell division. Why, even before that first cell divided, already it had decided for male or female. Now, those are nature’s divisions, not Jesus’, but they are good. They begin to point to a depth in division. Mother and child certainly experience a big one on the birth day. May it not be long division. Soon, the child discovers separation from objects, then from her mother. Her first “No!” surely divides her from her parents, and still more, from her tiny past. On it goes. Piaget pioneered the study of the development of a child’s mind, as new capacities divide ignorance from perception. The time we call adolescence causes almost every home to shudder with divisions. Robert Kegan, in a book called *In Over Our Heads*, describes the goal of parenting teens as drawing them into a deeper level of consciousness, as if leading them into deeper water, undergoing a division between their childish self-obsession and their power to perceive the needs of their family as essential to their own identity. These are all divisions natural to our species. They are not the division Jesus brings. But we see that in the nature of God, division is both painful and necessary.

If at about the time a person stops growing outward and upward, she or he stops growing up altogether, nature has no more divisions to offer. If you agree to stop at red lights and go at green, society is happy enough to have you another worker to bear its loads and its babies and bring them along the paths we’ve described to bear its loads and its babies and bring them along . . . Such is the nature we share with all creatures, a division of labor, and then the end. Social convention does not concern itself, whether any of us find a pass through this divide. Most do not, thought Thoreau: “The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation.” *Many are called, few are chosen*, thought Jesus. Our heart may cry out compassion or rage or revolution at the oppression and repression and depression which so reduce human capacities to those of animals, and to less than animals, since they, at least, suffer no offense in their labors. But shall we pass over? Society cares not. This is what Jesus’ division is about.

From the last century, depth psychology used a non-religious language to describe this crisis. Some use the term “first adulthood” to refer to the personality—the persona, the mask—which we hastily pull on as we leave adolescence. The mass of men, they want to get a handle on us out there, to see how we’ll fit in, so we offer one up, fast, made up of our strengths and attractions, rouging out our wounds

and weaknesses. In my late twenties, I worked for an organization with a reputation for innovation in a certain field. I had only a little knowledge in that field, but at conferences, with my name plate and affiliation and smooth words as mask, people approached me as an expert. Was every young professional in the room hiding confusion and ignorance of some sort behind the mask of authority and good appearance?

What drives us to keep masked? To lord it over one over another, to lust for power and control, for money, standing and prestige? It's exhausting, so we retreat into our so-called private lives and are tempted there to mask ourselves from ourselves with the numberless means we have to dull the senses and kill time. Ecclesiastes has it that "God has put eternity in our mind"—but our masks show that it is hard to become human. We can hardly abide it, seeing that this eternity is not ours to have and to hold.

Many take comfort in what I call the two-bit solution: I once was lost, but now I'm saved. Bit off / bit on. I once was religious, but now I'm beyond all that childishness. I once was a Republican, but now I'm a Democrat. Or vice-versa. In other words,, we are tempted to put an end to the eternity within ourselves by dividing reality in two: those who have not yet arrived, those who have. But whoever makes this two-bit division stops growing. It is civilization's oldest story, the precursor of every violence and oppression.

But "I came to bring fire to the earth," says Jesus. "Do you think I came to bring peace? No, I tell you, but division." This is what I hear in the word. Suppose that the natural processes of division we so easily observe in biological development belong even more deeply and fundamentally to our human nature than to our bodily nature. Suppose this is God's nature, that consciousness continually develop from the way she once saw to the way she will see. Suppose God's sole provision is strength to make division between old visions and our new? "Morning by morning, new mercies I see—all I have needed, thy hand hath provided." Perhaps we are touching a power in Jesus' word: *No, not peace, I tell you, but division!*

I have taken the title of today's sermon from a book by C.S. Lewis of the same name. It is a little parable of hell and heaven. In his preface, the author advises the reader that he has written fiction; he does not wish "to arouse factual curiosity about the details of the afterworld." But thus warned, we get into it. The narrator is in hell. It is a huge, dreary place always in twilight. A bus is idling at a stop. It is headed to heaven. At will, anyone may get on and leave hell permanently. But mostly, they don't. Even those who do take the trip up and arrive and feel the solid reality overwhelming their vague and constant obsessions—still they fear the fierceness of the blessing and, mostly, they go back to hell—freely, if you can call it that.

The startling symbols of evil and of good in this novel could occupy an hour's telling, but for now I hold up one thing from the story: The possibility that division between people can be necessary, even divinely required. The narrator is listening to a dialogue between a wife, some years dead, now of heaven, and her husband, who made the trip up from hell for the day. She instantly asks forgiveness for things done and not done. He remembers his hurt and tries to bend her pity toward him with pleadings and accusations, that if she really loves him, she will come down to live with him in hell. Sound like some marriages? The wife is not shocked or angry or moody or afraid. She loves him truly, yet she has grown too real, too great for this pitiful appeal. Finally, the husband just vanishes. This is the great divorce, a great division.

Lewis considers the great divorce a Christian division, a decisiveness which does not elevate or distance a person from others, but which guards what is first, the God-relationship—that is, the possibility of inner growth. There on the first lawn of heaven, the narrator asks his Teacher to explain:

“Someone must say in general what’s been unsaid among you there for many a year: that love, as mortals understand the word, isn’t enough. Every natural love will rise again and live forever here in this country, but no natural love will rise again until it has been buried.” “The saying is almost too hard for us,” the narrator responds. “But it is cruel not to say it. Those who know have grown afraid to speak. That is why sorrows which used to purify now only fester.”

A hundred years earlier, Kierkegaard wrote something similar: “Worldly wisdom thinks that love is a relation between one person and another. Christianity teaches that love is a relation between: a person-a God-a person, where God is the middle term. For to love God is to love oneself in truth. To help another human being to love God is to love that other. To be helped by another human being to love God is to be loved . . . Beware that it not become more important for you that you are looked upon as loving them than that you actually love them.” (*Works of Love*, p. 113, 132)

Friends, the part of us that is masked, the part of us that is still hurt by our wounds, the part of us that is yet unbaptized into life with no end but God—that part craves to hold others in our orbit, or to be held in theirs, but in either case, to avoid the division of inner growth and development. That part of us wants to make a separate peace with God, so we may stay inside our mask. That part of us admits no thought of division and separation from the things we cling to. This is the household Jesus describes, divided three against two, two against three, undecided whether to give more, learn more, grow more. As long as the indecision rules, we will continue in whatever paths we’ve marked.

But let not our past govern us. Let us be like the wanderer in the song we’re about to sing. The song is taken from Jacob’s story, who wanders into the dark desert after he has cheated his brother, for now he must abandon his fortune, his family, and his past to seek a new way to be. All our tradition lifts up Jacob as one who, in the power of God, makes a division between what he was and what he shall be. He does this not just once—no two-bit solution for him—but many times, a continual rising up. Come now and draw from your hearts and lips a decisive song of hope for your division in Christ from what was to what shall be, growing ever nearer, my God, to thee.

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