

In the Name of the Living God: Creator Father, Redeemer Son and Sanctifying Holy Spirit.
Amen.

Okay....so, after that gospel reading from Luke, it is a good thing that we do not call this “family Sunday”. Right?

In a way, this reminds me of the American Civil War. In the east, the battle of Gettysburg was fought on July 1, 2 and 3, 1863. But, at that same time, there was a conflict toward the west that was every bit as important, if not more so. On the next day, July 4, 1863, the siege for the battle of Vicksburg, Mississippi ended with the confederate army surrendering to the U.S. Army of the Tennessee, commanded by General Grant.

The fall of Vicksburg was probably more significant in that not only did it cut the confederacy in two...east separate from west...but it also opened the Mississippi River back to commercial shipping all the way to the Gulf, which was an absolute critical and political necessity to continue the war for the north. Grant and his army were then able to “sling their backpacks for new fields”.

Anyway, the siege of Vicksburg took a good month and a half. And, while stories after the war about brother fighting brother, and father fighting son, grew longer year after year, it was factually true during the siege of Vicksburg. Missouri sent the most men to serve both sides...from the same neighborhood, from the same household.

During that month and a half, they shot at each other all day from nearby trenches. Mercilessly aiming to pick off the other, regardless of blood relation. But at night, when things quieted down, they often called each other, came to “no man’s land” in between, and in many cases, one brother from the north would give paper money to the brother serving the south, so he could send it home to help support the “old folks”. At night, they openly traded tobacco for coffee, whiskey for bread, and so on. And then, daylight...the shooting started up again.

Within my knowledge of American history, that example may be the latest similarity to what we read today. Except Jesus does not call for an evening armistice for greeting, sharing and helping. Instead, he seems to be calling for all out conflict...predicting that the strife will be continuous and permanent. Prince of peace? Not in these verses. What is going on?

Here in the 21st century, reading and preaching biblical texts always involves bridging the biblical story and today’s world...and, in some weeks, the chasm between the two is deep and wide, and this week is a perfect example. By and large, we avoid conflict and division in our congregations at all costs, yet here Jesus is talking about bringing just that. We want peace and moreover call Jesus the prince of peace, yet just now Jesus says that is not what he came to bring. We are, by and large, focused on the

present, or are at least certainly not looking for the end of the world, and yet in this passage Jesus seems to look to the future and it is, to say the least, foreboding. But let's look for some context.

At this point in the story, Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem, where the conflicts he has been experiencing will boil over into a plot to take his life. And of course Jesus knows this. He knows that he will soon be baptized, not by water, but by the fire kindled with nails and wood, and just now he feels the weight and pressure of what is to come. He is, to use a word with which we are very familiar, *stressed*, stretched to the point of breaking. Stress is one of the watchwords of our age, as we also often feel pulled by schedules and responsibilities and pressures beyond what we can endure. And Jesus knows this. We confess that God became human in Jesus precisely to know and redeem our condition. No, we are not facing crucifixion, but many of us are facing terminal illness, or a loss of job or wages, or deep loneliness, or mental illness, or ... the list goes on. We at times feel pulled beyond what we can endure and Jesus has been there.

I have a sense that Jesus was beginning to become impatient with his limited time. That he was getting more direct with today's gospel....over the direct conflict within even family units between those who will, and those who will not give themselves completely to God. Those who will, or will not, love the Lord their God with all their heart, and mind, and strength. That, in turn, leads to a transformation of those who will...a transformation by God over time, away from the desires, the priorities, the comforts of this world. A natural, slow-forming separation between the Kingdom of God and that of this world.

Is the relative ease of the Christian life in this land entirely the result of cultural acceptance, or is it because we fail to live into the gospel Jesus announced? Throughout Luke's account, Jesus announces a new community...he calls it the kingdom of God...that is governed not by power but by equity, where all those in need are cared for, where forgiveness is the norm, where the poor are privileged, where wealth is shared rather than hoarded, and where the weak and lonely are honored.

What might our personal and congregational lives look like if we took Jesus words more seriously at home, work, school, and in our communities? Might we experience more of the stress and division Jesus speaks of if we were to push our community leaders or stretch our personal and congregational budgets care more fully for the poor? What holds us back from embracing the kingdom life Jesus both describes and demands? What fears, pressures, and stresses distract us from the mission to which Jesus has called us?

This is not to suggest that we have intentionally shirked our responsibilities. No, the pressures and stresses we feel are real. We have families to care for, jobs to tend, responsibilities to all manner of people and organizations. But we also live in a culture that equates wealth with character, that elevates consumption to an art form, that teaches us to look out for our own well-being above that of all others.

So what kind of sermon might encourage us in leading the kind of life that Jesus modeled? Perhaps one that takes the stresses of this life seriously, that reminds us that Jesus understands these stresses, and that promises that the baptism of fire that Jesus underwent in his crucifixion he endured so that we might have the promise that wherever we are, Jesus has already been, and where Jesus is now, we shall someday be.

Jesus dies, we regularly confess, for our sins, those of both omission and commission. And the promise of the gospel is that there is nothing we can do to lose that forgiveness or the larger inheritance of abundant life that Jesus won. Sometimes that promise leads us into a kind of pious indolence, where we come to believe that our failures and shortcomings are not all that serious, for we have been justified by faith.

But sometimes...and perhaps this is one of those times....that promise of forgiveness and life might also lead us to a kind of holy engagement. Where we...as individuals, households, and communities of faith...commit ourselves once again to being “people of the Way”. People who strive to follow Jesus in word and deed, knowing that the path we tread follows his own and that he accompanies us on it.

Following Jesus as “people of the Way” may lead to strife and division, at least for a time...which I have known and continue to know in my own life. But they will also lead to a deeper sense of that peace that passes all understanding, as we are caught up in the abundant life that comes from following our Lord...who continues to bless, support and accompany us in our various journeys through life, in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen.