

FAMILY FEUD

Luke 12:49-560

A teenage girl at summer camp was torn between two sets of friends. Some of them were sunbathing on the dock, saying to her “stay with us.” But her other friends were in a rowboat saying “no, come with us.” There she stood, one foot on the dock, the other foot on the edge of the boat, but the boat was moving. Trying to appease everyone, trying to not decide, she ended up falling into the water; and worse, her hair got wet! Following Jesus, saying “yes” to him means saying “no” to something else. If not we end up like that girl did on the dock. We try to go in both directions and we just end up all wet.

In the lesson Jesus first mentioned fire. Fire can be a metaphor for judgment or for purification. Elijah brought the fire of judgment on the prophets of Baal. John the Baptist said that the messiah would “baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire,” the fire of purification. Then Jesus mentioned baptism. Baptism seems here to be a symbol for death, a life-threatening immersion in water, alluding to his crucifixion. And then Jesus mentioned that he was under a lot of stress. I take a bit of comfort in knowing that Jesus also dealt with stress.

Then I get stressed by what he said next. “Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division!” This seems to stand in contrast to Jesus whom we know as the Prince of Peace in whose name we are called to break down dividing wall of hostility and to conduct a ministry of reconciliation. What happened? Did the stress get to him? Or was he just pointing out that his followers are always causing division?

There is an old legend about a knight who had returned to his lord’s castle at twilight. He had been gone many days. He was bloody and battered and his horse was limping, his armor bore the scars of great conflict. The lord of the castle rushed out to greet his knight. “What hath befallen you, Sir Knight?”

Trying to straighten himself up to full stature, the knight replied, “Sire, I have been laboring in your service, battling and pillaging your enemies to the west, to the north, to the south and to the east.” The lord of the castle said, “I did not know I had any enemies in the east.” “Well,” said the knight, “you do now.”

Pliny was a Roman governor in the first and second centuries. Amongst his surviving letters to the Roman emperor is one saying that he didn’t know

what these Christians believed exactly but they were the most willful, obstinate, rebellious, disobedient people he had ever encountered. Therefore he had put some of them to death just on general principles.

But wait. It gets worse. “From now on five in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three; they will be divided: father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law.”

I have preached on this gospel lesson only twice and it was over 30 years ago and I have not touched it since. Both times this was the Gospel lesson my parents surprised me with a visit to the church where I was preaching. I am not sure I handled it well either time.

Family feuds are the worst. A cartoon showed a young woman talking to a minister. She said, “John and I are having a terrible time, and we need your advice. We are trying to decide how to divide the furniture, who gets what of the money we’ve saved and who gets custody of the children.” “Oh,” the minister asked, “are you contemplating divorce?” “Oh, no,” she replied. “We are trying to work out our prenuptial agreement.”

The worse war our nation ever fought, a war in many ways still going on 150 year later, was a national family feud, the Civil War, or as it is sometimes called down south the War Between the States or the War of Northern Aggression. Look at what has happened at the Chrystal Cathedral. Robert Schuler who founded the church ended up appointing his son to succeed him only to fire his son and hire his daughter for the position. I wonder what their family gatherings are like.

A few years ago I was riding with one of my cousins’ from Columbus, Ohio to northern Michigan on the way to his sister’s 50th wedding anniversary celebration. On the way up they made it plain that they were strong supporters of President Bush and they listened regularly to Fox News and they were not tolerant of any one who did not listen to Fox News and support President Bush and hinted that if I did not agree I would be welcome to walk the rest of the way – which was about 200 miles and I was quite quiet. When we arrived at the home of his sister there was a banner across the driveway saying, “End the War – Impeach President Bush.” It was an interesting weekend.

I remember the time I heard about a young man I knew whose family was preparing a funeral for him. I was shocked because I had heard nothing about his death but then I learned that his family were very conservative Jews and their son had become a Christian so they responded as is the custom of some by having a funeral. He was dead to them, a terrible family feud over faith.

In the first century those who converted to Christianity were treated like that. The extended family was held in even closer esteem than today. Converts to Christ were disowned, considered an enemy of the family. How much easier to just go along with the family even if it means denying our faith and what it means for us to follow Jesus. Divisions may come, but God's purpose in sending fire to families is to cleanse and purify people's lives and relationships. Surely he does not mean that such divisions are a good thing. They are simply inevitable.

So these words of Jesus come as a warning that following him can have very difficult consequences in the most intimate and personal places which may be why we try to deal with what is on the surface and avoid what is at the depths. Family is the most intimate occasion to love and forgive and be forgiven, to argue and be reconciled, to care for and be cared to. When we talk of two people being intimate we usually means a physical intimacy.

I recall hearing a conversation involving William Willimon, then Dean of the Chapel at Duke, interviewing the writer Kathleen Norris. The conversation turned to marital intimacy. Katherine said that when her husband was dying and she was taking care of his physical and emotional and spiritual needs it brought them to a new and greater level of intimacy.

Such intimacy is not always welcome. It can be easier to avoid it and keep the intimacy of our faith at arms length. I have observed that most people are far more willing to talk about their sex life than their prayer life because prayer can be much more intimate than sex.

There are things in society inhibiting intimacy. Exhibit A: the cell phone. Who here owns one? Who does not? You can see groups of youth walking together, each on a cell phone talking with someone not there while ignoring those they are with. You see moms pushing strollers, not talking with there children but on a cell phone talking with someone not there. Cell phones and computers and TV's for all their convenience have a way of avoiding intimacy.

Constant noise is a way of avoiding intimacy. Even in worship we can keep ourselves so surrounded with sound and activity there can be little room for God. A few weeks ago I heard a pastor tell how he tried to increase the length of the silent prayer. Each week it was 10 seconds longer. He discovered – at least in his church – that 2 minutes and 35 seconds was the absolute most the congregation could bear to be silent.

In the church I serve we have struggled the last couple of years just to getting members to be silent during the prelude. The prelude is intended for us to prepare ourselves for worship but it is so often used to prepare plans for their afternoon lunch. God spoke through the Psalmist and declared, “Be still and know that I am God.” Yet in some homes there is constant noise but not times for the intimacy of silence.

Local folks have read a lot in the paper about what to do with the homeless and mentally ill and aimless youth on Main Street in Hyannis. Many strong opinions have been expressed in emails and letter to the editor. I work on Main Street in Hyannis. Several times a week I walk up and down Main Street. I get to meet merchants and tourists and those sitting on park benches along the way. What I do not see are those people who express their opinions so loudly. They are compassionate – from a distance.

If you are really concerned with these people talk with them, learn their names and how they became homeless, addicted, injured, alienated from their families, unemployed. Hear them babble on about things you cannot understand and see what you do when they ask for money and get a whiff of how they smell. Then when you say we should preach good news to the poor you will know of whom you speak. It is a lot easier to carry on a feud from the safety of a computer.

Intimacy in family, the face to face meeting, sharing what is deep within carries a risk of creating a feud, but it is also where there is such a greatest opportunity for the intimate practice of faith. It is easier to avoid a feud over faith and express no particular faith and commitment.

Karl, the best man at our wedding, worked for a time as a private eye. He told me of a woman who called him because she was sure her husband was having an affair. Every Sunday morning he scrubbed up and dressed unusually well and was gone all morning and never told her where he was going. So my friend Karl trailed him for several Sundays in a row. Finally he met with the wife and said, “I don’t know how to tell you this but your husband has been going to church. Here is my bill.”

Jesus concluded this lesson by talking about reading the signs of the weather and the signs of the times. In Palestine a cloud rising in the west, originating over the Mediterranean, promises rain. A south wind, originating in the desert, told people to expect a scorcher. Farmers and shepherds knew how to read such signs. Such knowledge was key to their survival. And so Jesus admonished us to be careful to interpret the signs around us in a correct manner.

When our goal becomes to simply get along, we are like the girl on the dock just getting all wet and treading water. Bill Cosby is credited with saying, "I don't know the secret to success, but the secret to failure is trying to make everybody happy." G. K. Chesterton observed that tolerance is the easy virtue of people who do not believe anything. And Jesus condemned those who said, "Peace, peace" where there is no peace.

Some unknown poet has put the observation poetically. Popularity was his middle name. Its' prod was pride, its price was pain. He never learned the word called, "no." They spoke of him as "good old Joe." His life was one long laughing spell, and how he felt you couldn't tell. His favorite words were 'yes,' and "sure." Yes, good old Joe was Simon Pure. So when he died they wrote these lines, and laid him down midst whispering pines. "Here lies a man - his name was Joe. But what he stood for, we'll never know."

To call the crowd hypocrites implies that they knew the truth but just act like they do not. In book with the wonderful title, *Soul Survivor, How My Faith Survived the Church*, Philip Yancey said, "Sometimes I fell like the most liberal person among conservatives, and sometimes like the most conservative among liberals." Should we go along with the prevailing thought, the 3 against the 2, or risk facing a family feud to follow Jesus?

Jesus is not anti-family. He is not setting family feuds as a goal for Christian living. Nor is commitment to Jesus to be a means of escaping commitment to family. Rather our commitment to Christ is what should guide and direct how we fulfill family commitments.

Jesus pointed to the reality that conflicts over faith and values exist in every family. Ignoring or avoiding this often results in a family with no particular faith. We are not called to feud with our family but to build a family on the foundation of faith. We are not called to a life of avoiding conflict but a life

following the way of Christ. We are not called to ignore the signs of Christ present but to reveal them in the ordinary things of each and every day.

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The Federated Church of Hyannis

At Craigville

Dr. John A. Terry, Pastor