

Whatever Happened to Peace on Earth?

12/6/15 Matt. 10:34-39

When we light the Advent Candles each Sunday, we highlight some of the things that Jesus' coming brought to our world- hope, peace, joy, and love. So far we've lit the candles for hope and peace. And Jesus brought all those things. But he also brought something else that we don't usually think or talk about during Advent- Jesus brought division and conflict. Now I don't think we'll be adding a "conflict candle" to our Advent wreath anytime soon, but listen to these words of Jesus found in Matt. 10:34-39 and you'll see what I'm talking about.

'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.*

*Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and
whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and
whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me.*

*Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake
will find it.*

Doesn't sound much like "gentle Jesus, meek and mild," does it? Let's look a little more closely at Jesus' words and then reflect on their meaning for us this Advent. Chapter ten in Matthew's gospel begins with Jesus giving instructions to his disciples as he sends them out on a mission. He tells them what to do, warns them about coming persecution, and instructs them not to be afraid because God will walk with them through their persecution. It is in the context of persecution that we find these words about division and conflict.

Now I know that verse 34 makes it sound like it is Jesus' intention to bring conflict. "*Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword...*" However, ancient people often expressed consequences as intentions, so I think we can read the verse to say, "Beware. My coming will inevitably cause conflict and division."

Historically, that is exactly what happened in the early church. When a member of a Jewish or Roman family became a follower of Jesus, they were often thrown out of their houses and disowned by the rest of the family. And during times of persecution, Christians were betrayed to the authorities by members of their own households. It seems that family members saw the decision to follow Jesus as a rejection of the values of their family, their nation and their culture. And that created deep hurt,

anger and division.

In some places this same kind of division happens today. It happens in strong, established Muslim countries like Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, and Jordan, and certainly in ISIS-controlled areas. It happens in extremist Hindu locations in India. It happens under atheist regimes like North Korea and in parts of China. Christians today are still being put out of their homes and villages. Just as Jesus warned, following him in some places today causes intractable divisions in societies and even in families.

And although the divisions are not as obvious, following Jesus Christ causes divisions even here in the good old USA. As a pastor I've often been asked to participate in various civic events- leading an invocation in local or state events, or delivering a baccalaureate address. I have found that I am perfectly free to say almost anything about religion and values and morality in these settings. But when I start to talk about Jesus, look out! Just ending a prayer "in Jesus name" can cause major problems. Jesus is still causing divisions today.

Why is Jesus still so divisive? I think it all starts with Christmas. Christians believe that God took on human flesh and came to earth in the person of Jesus Christ, who later died and was resurrected for the sins of the world. We assert that this was a one-time event in history. That causes problems for a society which tends toward relativism, the view that any

belief or value is as valid and good as any other belief. That Buddhists and Hindus and Muslims and Christians all have part of the truth and that no one has it all.

So when many in our society hear Jesus' claim that, "*I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except by me,*" (John 14:6) they become apoplectic, because Jesus is clearly asserting one belief above all others. They are facing what theologian Lesslie Newbigin has called the "scandal of particularity," that there is one Savior, who came one time, for the redemption of all people. Christian religion is not primarily about values, ethics, or even doctrines; it's about a real person, Jesus, who we believe is God in the flesh. That's what we celebrate every Christmas. And that is a direct challenge to the relativism so common in our society. Jesus is still causing division.

Now in order to maintain peaceful relations, to maintain civility, to keep from rocking the boat in our pluralistic society, Christians are tempted to make some compromises. First, we are tempted to compromise our beliefs. A few years ago, a national study of youth and religion conducted by sociologist Christian Smith at UNC found some interesting things regarding the religious beliefs of our teenagers. First, he found that their beliefs are very similar to those of their parents. And he classified the dominant religious beliefs of today's teens as "moralistic therapeutic

deism.” (I may have talked about this before, but I think it bears repeating.) “Moralistic”- having concern about what is right and wrong. “Therapeutic”- a religion that makes us feel good. “Deism”- believing in a God who is usually detached from human affairs. “Moralistic Therapeutic Deism.”

Here are its basic tenets: God exists. God created the world and ordered it, which is why it runs the way it does. But God isn't really necessary for your life, unless you are in trouble. God is like a cosmic therapist who can make you feel better, or divine butler who can help you when you are in trouble. In addition, the purpose of life is happiness. Good people go to heaven, and most people are good.

I think that is a pretty good summary of the predominant religious beliefs in America. And it fits well in a relativistic society. But it is far from authentic Christian belief. It says nothing about the problem of sin and evil. It says nothing about redemption and grace. It says nothing about a life of service to a higher good. It makes no demands on how we should live. And it says nothing about Jesus Christ.

The first temptation Christians face in a pluralistic society is to compromise our beliefs, especially beliefs about Jesus. The second is to compromise the teaching and values of Jesus, because Jesus' teaching and ethics are also divisive. If you doubt me, consider the extreme pro-life views of Jesus, who says we should not fight back even when violence is

committed against us, but should instead turn the other cheek! And that God is even concerned with the life of a single sparrow! That has implications for abortion, which extinguishes the life of an unborn child or fetus. That has implications for capital punishment, which almost everyone agrees is so flawed we are certainly executing innocent people, and that it is not being equally applied to rich and poor, to black and white. Jesus' teachings have implications for war, which is often about fighting back when some wrong has been done to us.

Or, consider Jesus' sexual ethics. Jesus reaffirmed the Old Testament teaching that sexual expression is allowed only in the context of a marriage between a man and a woman. That view has usually been understood to mean that living together, having sex outside of marriage, and homosexual sexual activity are all out of bounds. And he permitted divorce and re-marriage only in extreme situations if at all!

In addition, Jesus called for justice and liberation for those who are oppressed or in prison. That has implications for a society like ours where the rich keep getting richer and the poor seemed trapped in crime and poverty.

Now since I prefer not to lose you for the rest of this sermon and since I suspect that I've just irritated both political liberals and conservatives, let me add this. I don't believe that Jesus gives us final

answers to any of these thorny matters. In fact Jesus didn't talk directly about abortion, capital punishment, war, homosexuality, or social reform. But I do believe that we must regard the principles and values of Jesus' teaching as authoritative when we seek to discern God's will in all matters. We resist this because the teachings of Jesus are very hard and demanding and place us out-of-step with our culture. They call us to much higher standards than those of the world- to the standards of the Kingdom of God. Because of that, we are tempted to ignore the teachings of Jesus when we decide difficult ethical matters.

Let's review. Jesus said that following him would lead to division and conflict. It did and it does, even in this country. Christians are tempted to compromise their beliefs about Jesus as well as their morals and ethics in order to fit in better in a relativistic society. It's a temptation for us each and every day, in the hundreds of small and large decisions we make.

To counter this temptation to compromise our beliefs and morality, Jesus gave us an important reminder:

"Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me.

(Matt. 10:37-38)

Jesus claims our ultimate allegiance, even over our families. What

might that look like in families today? A wife may become active in a church even though her husband disapproves. A husband may begin attending Al-Anon, because he no longer wishes to be complicit in his wife's drinking. A young adult may pursue a vocation in mission service or ordained ministry, even though that runs counter to the wishes of his or her parents. Our allegiance to Jesus supersedes our allegiance to our families, to our schools, to our friends, to our job, to our nation, even to our church. That is radical stuff, isn't it? Frankly, I wish Jesus hadn't said something this harsh! But he did, and he's the only Savior we've got! Jesus says following him involves costs and we need to be prepared for that, especially when Jesus' teachings and moral demands run counter to those of our culture. Following Jesus will bring division and conflict.

Finally, Jesus gives a rather paradoxical bit of hope at the end of this section. *"Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it."* (Matt. 10:39) John Knox, the great Presbyterian reformer, interpreted this verse as follows, "The one who secures his life by denying his faith (under persecution) or makes peace with the world by denying his conscience" will lose his very soul, his identity as a follower of Jesus. If a person compromises their beliefs and morals in order to get along in this world, they will soon find that they have lost the very essence of the life God gave them to live.

But if a person loses everything as they seek to be true to following Jesus Christ, they will discover the essence of who they are, the essence of life itself. *“Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.”* (Matt. 10:39)

As we celebrate the Lord's Supper in a few minutes, you may want to use the time to reflect on the demands of the Savior that came into the world on that first Christmas, and commit yourself once more to following him.