

“Blood and Water”

A Sermon Preached by Young-Mee Park
At First United Methodist Church of Oak Park
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"I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what stress I am under until it is completed! Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division! 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." He also said to the crowds, "When you see a cloud rising in the west, you immediately say, 'It is going to rain'; and so it happens. And when you see the south wind blowing, you say, 'There will be scorching heat'; and it happens. You hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present time? (Luke 12:49-56)

One night, Bishop William Willimon, then the Dean of the Chapel at Duke University, was meeting with a group of students in a dormitory. He was asked to lead them in a discussion of Christian worship. In order to engage the students in conversation, he asked them, *“Those of you who’ve seen Christians at worship, what would you say is the strangest thing that you’ve seen? And don’t mention the thing about the man, or a woman, in the white dress — something else.”* And a student spoke up and said, *“I think the weirdest thing is when, at the beginning, they bring in that great, big book. They bring it up and put it up on the lectern and you can see the person bringing it in sort turns toward the clergy and says, ‘Here, work from this.’ That’s weird.”*

At our church, that great big book is kept here on the pulpit, but in some churches, it is brought into the worship in the processional. Processional or not, don’t you think it a little strange that we, the people living in the 21st century North America should gather every Sunday and submit to these old writings, something written by ancient Jews thousands of years ago?

Today, we did not use the great big book, but a small white book, which is Jill Janssen’s personal Bible. When I met the Janssen family a couple of weeks ago, Jill showed me the Bible and said, *“This is the family Bible. It was given to me when I was twelve, and it has been with me since. Could we have it at our son Alexander’s baptism, too?”*

Thank you, Jill and Greg, for sharing your Bible with us today. But what a story I asked you to read today! I hope you were not shocked or offended. Jesus says, *“I came to bring fire to the earth... Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division! 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." (Luke 12:49, 51-53)

This definitely is not our usual Sunday fare, is this? No easy yokes or light burdens. No comforting and soothing words about peace, love, and forgiveness, but fire and division instead, even in families! What is Jesus talking about?

Coming from a non-Christian culture, I know that faith can divide families. Just as in the first century Jewish world, family ties were very important in Korea, my country of origin. And for many, converting to Christianity meant coming into conflict with your family's tradition which was Buddhist or Confucianist. I have seen many families split apart over faith questions. Yes, from my own experience, I know that faith can divide families.

However, I do not think that this is what Jesus is talking about in our Gospel lesson today. Rather, Jesus is dealing with something bigger, much bigger, than an occasional family spat over faith.

Whether we live in the first century Jewish world or in twenty-first century North America, family is the basic unity, the primary community, in which we find protection and nurture. Of course the way to be a family has changed much through history, but then and now, the family is the primary community in and through which we discover and develop our identity and our relationships. And in today's text, Jesus says that he has come to bring about division and conflict in families.

What is he talking about? Is he attacking the family itself? Well, what do you think? I think that Jesus is getting at something even bigger than that. Actually, he is confronting not just the family, but also all the communities or associations that are similar to families. Yes, I do think that Jesus is saying that he came to disrupt and confront all those "families" behind which we hide for security and protection, that he has come to turn upside down all those false "families" that we use to satisfy our own greed and ego needs.

Let me explain myself. How many of you have ever said or heard the proverb, "*Blood is thicker than water*"? In this saying, blood represents family relations, right? But I don't think it far-fetched to expand this beyond family relations. Think about classism, sexism, agism, racism, regionalism, and parochialism. Of course you condemn all those bad -isms, don't you?

However, there are more sophisticated and subtler forms of -isms. How about acts of violence committed in the name of a country? How about selfishness and greed exercised in the name of the group you belong to? You are a murderer if you kill a person as an individual. But you may be called a patriot if you murder in the name of your country. You are a selfish person if you monopolize all the cookies or all the toys. But you are a hero if you do it on behalf of the group to which you belong. As long as it profits your group, as long as it serves the interest of your group, they don't care. They may even make you a hero. Yes, my sisters and brothers, we hide behind the family, behind the "community" to justify evil within us. And we say, "*Blood is thicker than water.*"

In today's Gospel lesson, Jesus is confronting just that. "*No. It is the other way around,*" says Jesus, "*Water is thicker than blood. In your of baptism, you became one household. Do not live as enemies, but as brothers and sisters.*"

My sisters and brothers, let us break it down. Let us tear it apart. Let us rend the simple bonds of blood, and replace them with the bond of water, the bond of God's peace and love that passes all understanding.

Here is the good news. The One who calls us to destroy the old bonds of blood is the same One who creates a new life and builds a new community. Water is thicker than blood. Thanks be to God!