

The Temptation of Peace  
Luke 12:49-56  
First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)  
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“Let there be peace on earth, and let it begin with me. Let there be peace on earth, the peace that was meant to be. With God our creator, children all are we. Let us walk with each other in perfect harmony...”<sup>1</sup> And the words go on.

This is one of my favorite songs. It makes me feel good. I’ve known it since I was a child. I could sing it in my sleep. We sang it to begin worship today. And it fits with my deepest desires...for peace, for harmony, for unity.

And yet, in so many ways this beloved song gets it wrong.

Yes, you heard me right...it gets it wrong. Because with its beautiful tune and the way it turns our hearts to hopeful mush, it forgets to remind us that peace is rarely easy. It forgets to remind us that peace takes work. It forgets to remind us that peace often comes only after a hard-fought journey. It forgets to remind us that peace is rarely a destination at which we arrive and remain, but more often a journey of steps and missteps, progress and backsteps.

Peace – that thing for which we long...that thing we glimpse on quiet beaches and mountaintop hikes...that thing we seek amidst the busyness and noise and rush of our days...peace is something we want but that we are rarely honest about.

And so, into our conversation comes Jesus, the one we have called the “Prince of Peace,” and in this passage from Luke’s gospel we hear him declaring, “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

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<sup>1</sup> Sy Miller and Jill Jackson, *Let There Be Peace on Earth*, 1955.

and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law.”<sup>2</sup>

And when we hear this, most of us barely recognize our Jesus. In fact, we would largely prefer to not read this passage at all.

After all, we like the Jesus who gently hold the baby lamb or who welcomes the children. We like the Jesus who brings everyone together rather than setting people against each other.

But in this picture Jesus says something very different.

So, rather than ignoring it or denying it, let’s explore this together.

Perhaps we are well served to begin by remembering that by this point in Luke’s gospel Jesus is on the road to Jerusalem, he’s on the road to the cross. In fact, back in Luke 9:51 we hear, “When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face toward Jerusalem.”<sup>3</sup> And so we must not lose sight of the reality that everything Jesus does from that point forward is done in the shadow of the cross, is done as he moves closer to his death.

What does this mean for this passage? Well, it reminds us that the stress of which Jesus speaks in verse 50 isn’t about stress or anxiety as we know it, but rather “highlights how Jesus is totally absorbed in the mission he has come to accomplish.”<sup>4</sup> And it is that mission – the mission of redirecting people toward the love of God and love of neighbor – that has Jesus focused and ready to risk even relationships in order to accomplish it.

See too often when we read this passage we respond by saying simply that following Jesus broke up families because some became part of the movement that became known as Christianity while other remained Jewish. While there were certainly families that were broken

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<sup>2</sup> Luke 12:51-53, NRSV.

<sup>3</sup> Luke 9:51, NRSV.

<sup>4</sup> Richard P. Carlson, *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 3* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 359.

apart because of religious commitments then just as there are now, these words from Jesus are not simply directed toward those who come from divided families.

These are also not words that give us permission to give up on a difficult relationship with a mother-in-law or some other family member. These words aren't to be understood as a reason to say good riddance to someone you wish wasn't at family dinners anyway.

Rather, these words and this reality to which Jesus spoke is about something much broader. It is about the willingness to risk the *impression* of peace, the willingness to risk relationships, not because we are fine without them, but because we are choosing something more important. It is not really about giving up peace but it is about choosing *God's peace* which is much more challenging. After all, as Richard P. Carlson writes, "The...peace that Jesus inaugurates...involves the establishment of proper relationships of mercy, compassion, and justice between God and humanity. Not everyone, however, wants or welcomes this divine peace plan."<sup>5</sup>

In other words, "for peace there has to be justice and there is work to do to get there. This is not just a passive ride."<sup>6</sup>

See, the reality is that all too often what we call "peace" is really just us putting on a false front, a fake smile. All too often our peace is about pretending to like someone in order to not have a fight in front of the family. All too often our peace is about allowing people to be unkind or bigoted or cruel so as to not "cause a fuss." All too often our peace is about keeping ourselves comfortable by not having difficult conversations. All too often our peace is a product of our privilege, it is an option we have because we can walk away from someone's rudeness or prejudice and be largely unaffected by it.

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<sup>5</sup> Carlson, 361 and 363.

<sup>6</sup> Comment from Bible Study, August 7, 2019.

But the peace to which Jesus calls us isn't about being safe and comfortable, but is about standing up for the rights of those whose rights are in question or being taken away. The peace to which Jesus calls us isn't about our choice to walk away from a conversation, but is about fighting for the rights of all people. The peace to which Jesus calls us is that which comes by way of justice, that which is the result of everyone starting from a level playing field and our willingness to name the truth of an unlevel one.

This passage uses the example of family relationships, but it's not just about family relationships. Rather this image is used because Jesus' culture understood the family as the building block for society, the place identity comes from.<sup>7</sup> To risk family was not something that people around Jesus did easily because those relationships were central to the rest of their lives. So, family here is a metaphor for whatever matters most. And in this passage Jesus is asking us if we are willing to risk what matters most in order to be on God's side, on the right side of human history, in order to fight for the rights of those who are without. He asks if we are willing to risk what matters, to give up things we value...in order to bring justice for another.

"Do you think I have come to bring peace to the earth?"<sup>8</sup> Jesus asks. And he answers his own question: "No, I tell you, but rather division!"<sup>9</sup> Again, this isn't the division that comes because we didn't get our own way or because we don't like a person's personality or choices. Rather, Jesus is working for something bigger and is asking us to do the same.

Jesus is telling us we must be willing to risk our reputations in order to stand up for the rights of another. Jesus is telling us we must be willing to risk the things we have accumulated

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<sup>7</sup> Carlson, 361.

<sup>8</sup> Luke 12:51a, NRSV.

<sup>9</sup> Luke 12:51b, NRSV.

in order to care for another who is without. Jesus is telling us we must be willing to risk the very relationships in our lives in order to speak the truth even when truth is difficult.

How many times have we asked people who were oppressed to be quiet because we were uncomfortable having to listen to their complaints? Because we felt like our peaceful lives were being disrupted by the truth they spoke about the systems in which we succeed?

We hold people in inhumane conditions at the borders because our lives are easier if we don't let them in and don't share our resources with them.

We watch black men being shot by police at an exponentially higher rate than white men but we push back against the cry of racism because we don't want to have to deal with our own part in it or what it means for the systems we participate in to be identified as racist.

We call names and stop buying products and refuse to give job opportunities to athletes who kneel during the anthem because we want to enjoy our pretend peace as we watch them play sports rather than to have our day disrupted by their critique of our country.

We go to family dinners and laugh along as racist and sexist jokes are told because it's easier to "keep the peace" than to stand up for what is right.

We don't often think of peace as a temptation, but it is. The easy, uncritical peace that many of us have been raised to embrace tempts us. But when we give in, then we step away from the peace and justice to which Jesus points us. Too often we call choosing our comfort: peace...too often we call feigning unity as we avoid difficult conversations: peace...too often we call keeping people in their place to avoid being honest about our own privilege: peace.

And yet Jesus calls us to something greater. See, it's not that he *isn't* the Prince of Peace. In fact, he is. But we will know Jesus' peace when our easy lives are made less comfortable. We will know Jesus' peace when justice reigns not just for we who have always had it, but for

people of color, for women in the workplace, for young people who are discovering who they are.

Peace is more than a symbol we put on our bumpers. It's more than a song that fills us with warmth. Peace, real peace, Jesus' peace, is about risk and about justice and about compassion. It is about speaking truth when truth is difficult. And that is the peace to which we are called. That call begins with confession.

So, let us pray together. When you hear me pray, "We are tempted to choose an easy peace" you are invited to respond, "Forgive us, O God."

Leader: God, we desire peace but too often we substitute security for peace, too often we substitute comfort for peace, too often we are willing to sacrifice your values for something that resembles calm but that isn't actually peace. We are tempted to choose an easy peace.

People: Forgive us, O God.

Leader: God, we desire peace but too often we sacrifice other people in order to have a pretend peace. Too often we don't stand up for injustice, don't speak out in the face of racism or sexism or other forms of bigotry. Too often we choose to not enter conflict and call that peace. We are tempted to choose an easy peace.

People: Forgive us, O God.

Leader: God, we get it wrong too often and yet we pray together because we want to get it right. So, give us the courage to speak the difficult word. Give us the willingness to set aside our comfort in order to stand, as Jesus did, for the least of your children and for the will of your heart. Amen.