

Sermon 08/18/2019

Have you ever noticed how many warning signs you pass by on an average day? Signs like “Do Not Enter,” “School Crossing,” “Caution: Wet Floor.” A trade school in Britain came up with an eye-catching warning sign to post in factories. On a piece of electrical equipment they posted—“Danger: Do Not Touch. Not only will this kill you, it will hurt the whole time you are dying.” Now that’s a warning sign you wouldn’t dare ignore!

In our Gospel Reading today Jesus, too, has a warning for his followers. The warning is this—if we choose him as our Savior and Lord, we may very well face criticism and rejection, even in our most intimate relationships. Listen closely to these disturbing words:

“I have come to bring fire on the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! But I have a baptism to undergo, and what constraint I am under until it is completed! Do you think I came to bring peace on earth? No, I tell you, but division. From now on there will be five in one family divided against each other, 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 daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law.”

That sounds like families I have known. Just kidding,...but could Jesus knowingly promote such division? This is a difficult passage. We want Christ to bring peace in our homes and in our world; but Christ is saying to us that his coming into the world will very well bring tension and division. Sports fans used to be the ultimate example of fanatical loyalty

and divisiveness. You can't cheer for both the Ravens and the Steelers. You have to choose. Either you love the Lakers and hate the Celtics, or you love the Celtics and hate the Lakers. Pick a side! But sadly, those aren't the biggest divisions in our country anymore. Today we are divided over politics, values, lifestyles, culture, ethnicity. We want our churches, at least, to be a voice of unity and peace. But the truth is: today you can't say anything ...without upsetting somebody.

When I lived in Washington Crossing, New Jersey, we were not far from an *Old School Baptist Church* that once served a settlement of English Anabaptists. At one time in the 18th century this congregation was led by James Manning who went off to found Brown University in Providence, so it wasn't what you'd call a cultural backwater. Unlike current-day Baptists the Old School Baptists left interpreting the Bible solely to the individual. Sunday sermons focused on the behavior of the congregants—Thomas, you sold a half-lame horse to brother Joseph; James, did you approve your daughter buying *Pride & Prejudice*; Mary, you were seen last night outside the Inn; *etc., etc., etc.* It was instructive to learn of others' faults and failures;...it was something completely different when it was your turn.

I've delivered many sermons over the past few years where people have questioned why I didn't name names of public figures guilty of what I was inveighing against. Well, unless I were preaching to a group of Old School Baptists—most of whom died out by the 1920's—naming names would only serve to “convict” *in absentia* with no chance to move the discussion beyond denunciation. You can draw your own conclusions: I won't make up your minds for you. Besides, it's the conclusions you draw

for yourself that become part of your *persona*, part of who you really are. And, having taken ownership, if you feel strongly enough, maybe you'd want to take those feelings out to where they might do some good—you'll never accomplish anything if you only keep "crabbing" to those who feel the same as you!

There are numerous examples in the Bible of Jesus upsetting the *status quo*. It's why some churches, in other parts of the world, have to meet in secret. Talking about your faith in certain quarters is guaranteed to create divisions. Jesus did not offer us a 24/7 protection policy, a prosperity "gospel" nor a "*Get out of jail*" card for all predicaments. It's important to remember, that wholehearted commitment always creates the possibility of tension.

Complete commitment to one thing requires rejecting any competing commitments. It's why people say that you should never talk about politics, religion or money at polite gatherings! But, that's why some people are so non-committal. They have a hard time handing over their heart, their energy, their time, their money, their future to a cause, to a relationship, to a belief. Commitment is scary. It requires discipline. It requires sacrifice. It requires giving up what feels good right now for what, hopefully, satisfies in the future. Some people may never take that step.

"Do you think I came to bring peace on the earth? No, I tell you, but division." Jesus warns us, wholehearted commitment always creates tension. But wholehearted commitment also creates passion. Jesus uses the imagery of fire to explain his mission on earth. "I have come to bring fire on the earth . . ."

Usually we think of fire as a destructive force. But fire can also mean other things that are positive—

Fire can symbolize passion. Wholehearted commitment creates passion as well as division. It's the kind of passion Christ means to engender in all his followers. "I have come to bring fire on the earth . . ." But fire has another benefit—fire brings new life. Christ knew that the fire that was kindled in him would be kindled in his followers after his resurrection. He also knew that everyone who had this fire burning within would find that this fire would burn away their old life, their old priorities, their old vanities. Fire destroys, but it also purifies. Fire releases new life.

We want the church to be a beacon of peace in our society. We want our faith in Jesus to bring greater peace, unity and understanding to our families, our towns, our world. But committing to Jesus as Lord means giving up all other gods—the idols we love to worship. It means putting God above everything, including our love for our family or our love for our own lives. The life, death, and resurrection of Jesus bring peace to our hearts. but they also carve the most-pronounced dividing line. So it goes—

Fire! Division! There is nothing comfortable about these things! Jesus on a number of occasions told his followers to expect big trouble. His way would divide people. His way would inflame people. His way would result in misunderstanding, unpopularity and maybe persecution. He chose to describe discipleship in terms of picking up a cross and following him. At first his closest friends, like Peter, did not want to believe this. They considered such talk ill-considered: God would not allow things to go so badly wrong. Only when Jesus came to his cross, and was not spared any suffering and shame, did they have to face up to the hard truth. Jesus, the person of supreme faith in a heavenly Father, died on a cross crying out his desolation to the heavens. A disciple, then or now, cannot assume that becoming a Christian will ensure a comfortable life surrounded by peace and prosperity—

I came to cast fire upon the earth, and I wish it were already ablaze. Do you imagine that I came to bring peace on earth? No way! I bring division. I am saying that the way of Christ is so contrary to the ways of this world, that at times there must be conflicts. Things get messy, as Jesus warned—People in the one house will be divided: three against two and two against three. Father against son 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. It doesn't get much messier than that! Fire: It does at times inflame those who stand against us. Division: It may embroil us in misunderstanding or make us the butt of jokes; it may lose us friends. It can, alas, in some cases, cause the break-up of marriages. Christ does not offer us a safety zone against misunderstanding or conflict. Nor are we hedged against accident or disease. Nor are we buttressed against poverty or bloody outrage. Sometimes very bad things happen to very good Christians. Whether good or evil happens to us in no way signifies our grasp on faith, or lack of it. Things are never as neat as the self-righteous people experiencing success would have us believe.

Crosses always remain mysteries in a world where the ultimate power is the love of God. But it is far better to live by faith in the Christ of the cross, than to go into denial and concoct some god of pretty, petty optimism. The Christ of the Cross is the God who shares everything that goes wrong in our lives, and who can take all the fire and division, all the disasters and the torn, bleeding ends, and work them all together for good. That is the bottom line—Our God works all together for good. God does not send calamity; but for those who maintain their trust, new patterns of beauty are forged out of the most ugly circumstances.

