

Faith in the Face of Division

It's a hard truth of the Gospels that Jesus isn't always the "gentle Savior, meek and mild" that we describe to children. Maybe it's his human side. (It can't be his divinity, because we know the Father never gets frustrated, impatient, or angry with his human children, right?) Jesus is generally a model of self-restraint but, every once in a while, he can be as stressed and snappish as any other tired, overworked person. Today's Gospel gives us one of those "onces." Jesus continues his speech to a crowd of thousands, with some asides to his disciples. Although I've always imagined Jesus's throngs of followers hanging worshipfully on his every word, this passage makes me wonder whether his audience starts giving him a hard time. Perhaps they don't appreciate Jesus dividing his attention between them and his favored few, especially after sitting out in the desert sun for hours waiting for him to speak. Perhaps they're confused by his message, or they don't like what he's saying. Perhaps they came hoping for a free meal of bread and fish, and don't want the lecture. Or perhaps some of them are there to heckle, either for their own amusement or at the prompting of the Temple authorities to see if they can throw Jesus off his game. It may be innocent enough, but Jesus sounds pretty exasperated. He's on his way to his Crucifixion, and he knows that time is running too short for childish complaints or goofing around. That may be why he moves to the topic of division.

If we cherish the image of Jesus as the comforting big brother who will smooth over all disagreements and knit humanity into one happy, harmonious family, his comments here shatter that picture fast. Jesus announces that he came to bring not peace, but division (though Luke omits the reference to him bringing a sword to the party that we find in Matthew). He tells his listeners that his arrival will bring division specifically into that most sacred of institutions: the family. It's no accident that the divisions he describes are between parents and parents-in-law

and their children. Jesus's presence in the world will create divisions between the old and the new, between authority figures and those they seek to rule, between traditional ways of thinking and being and his radically different approach to life and faith. And although his words may sound like a threat, I think they're more likely just a prediction of what's going to happen as his message and ministry reverberate around the world. Or, rather, what should happen, and would happen if people would stop pretending that they don't understand Jesus's teachings and instead start trying to live as he tells us we should.

Just as I always imagined his audiences listening raptly to Jesus, I always presumed that, although they might have been confused sometimes, his followers sincerely wanted to learn from him. Bible scholar Justo L. González is more skeptical. In his theological commentary on Luke's Gospel, Dr. González points out that the divisions Jesus describes will inevitably arise when his followers try to do things the way Jesus wants them done and those who "march to the common tune ... accuse them of upsetting the parade, and [] seek to suppress or oust them." He also points out that, thanks to Jesus, we know that the future belongs to the Kingdom of God. Still, "people refuse to see it, and continue life as if nothing were happening. Hypocritically," Dr. González writes, "although we know what the master wants, we find all sorts of reasons to continue living as if the present order were permanent." By this point in Luke's Gospel, Jesus has offered ample proof of his identity to anyone willing to recognize him, but people continue to question or ignore signs that are as clear as a cloud rising in the west or a south wind blowing. No wonder Jesus sounds a little frustrated as he addresses his contemporaries. Given the circumstances in our world today, he may well be on his way to full-blown apoplexy.

Some theologians argue that we shouldn't oversimplify Jesus's teachings. They point out discrepancies between the four Gospels' versions of events, apparent disagreements between the

Gospels and the epistles, and the inevitable ambiguities that come from translating centuries' old texts that were edited and recopied many times before they finally reached us. Sometimes, they throw in the political biases of the translators – the King James Version of the Bible emphasizes royal authority for a reason – and those who are really determined toss in the Apocrypha, the writings of the early church fathers and a dash of first century Jewish historian Flavius Josephus for good measure. I enjoy a rousing theological debate as much as anyone and readily admit that many of the points made by those erudite scholars are historically and intellectually valid. I'm just not sure that they're really all that important, however, because Dr. González is right; *we know what the master wants*. It might not be immediately obvious in every circumstance what Jesus would like us to do. Prayer and discernment may be called for, and it's always important to approach complex situations with humility and grace. But the broad parameters of Jesus's call for mercy, compassion, and love for God and each other are undeniably clear. We know what the master wants. We just don't want to do it. And that opens up a whole line of discussion that has nothing whatsoever to do with translation, textual exegesis, ancient history, or secular politics.

Bible scholars use the Greek word *eschaton* (ἔσχατον) to refer to the final destiny of humankind and Creation. Christianity's eschatological expectation is that Jesus, the only risen Son of God who redeemed us thousands of years ago, will “come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end.” Dr. González correctly argues that “Eschatological hope is not just a matter for the future. If we really expect the future we claim to await, this should have an impact on the way we live in the present.” Divine judgment is an uncomfortable topic because we all miss the mark. It can be tempting, for me at least, to avoid thinking about how Jesus will look at me when it's my turn to stand before him. He knows me awfully well. But I can't honestly deny that it will happen, so it behooves me to do the best I can

now in the hope that his expression will reflect more love and forgiveness than disappointment when we're finally face to face. Even being reasonably confident that he'll forgive me, I don't want to let him down. Perhaps you feel the same way; as your pastor, I pray that you do.

That leads us back to division. Some people love conflict and generate it whenever they can. Jesus didn't shy away from conflict, but he didn't make it the centerpiece of his ministry, either. That one time he turned over tables in the Temple has to be viewed in the context of his compassionate message, miraculous healings and self-sacrifice. My sense is that Jesus doesn't want us to instigate conflict, but he does want us to love God and each other, care for the least among us as if we were caring for him and embrace every opportunity to bring his Father's Kingdom a little closer. Some of us may be called to engage in open conflict but, for the rest, our preferred course may be to serve our Lord to the best of our ability without worrying too much about what others are doing, and to resist nonviolently those who try to keep us from his work. If our faithfulness to Christ's teachings creates division between us and those who either benefit from the status quo or, worse, want to erase whatever progress we've achieved toward making our world more just, peaceful, inclusive, clean, and safe for all of God's children, so be it.

Luminaries from Aristotle to Barack Obama have spoken about the merits of unity. They're right but, in these extraordinary times, honest divisions may serve God's purposes better than a false unity that keeps the peace at the expense of our Christian principles. If we succeed in living out Jesus's teachings, perhaps the divisions we wrestle with now will eventually yield to a deeper, more faithful unity. After all, Jesus brought us these divisions himself. He wouldn't have done that without good reason. So, let's go forth into the world in faith, not heightening our divisions but not hiding from them, either. Jesus brought them to us, and Jesus will heal them when the time is right. Meanwhile, we have his work to do. Amen.