

Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost; September 4, 2022

+ Luke 12:49-53 +

“Christ Divides, Too”

“I have come to throw fire on the earth, and how I wish it were already ignited. But I have a baptism to undergo, and how distressed I am until it is finished! Do you think that I came to bring peace on the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division. Yes, from now on there will five divided in one household: 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 her mother-in-law.”

When the prophet Isaiah predicted the Savior’s birth, he called him “The Prince of Peace.” When the virgin Mary gave birth to Jesus on Christmas night, the angels sang, “Peace on earth!” To comfort his disciples before his ascension, Jesus told them, “My peace I leave with you; my peace I give you.”

And throughout God’s Word we hear his encouragement for us to live in peace. St. Paul begins his list of the fruits of the Spirit with love, joy, and peace. God’s Word announces peace, promises peace, and encourages peace. And that’s why so many people see a major contradiction when the man born to a chorus of peace, the man who promises and commands peace, says, **“Do you think I came to bring peace on the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division.”** In his Gospel, St. Matthew records more of Jesus words, even stronger: **“I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.”**

Well, my gracious. Who kidnapped the Prince of Peace? What happened to “peace on earth?” What about “My peace I leave with you?” If God promises peace in Jesus, and he wants us to live in peace with each other, what’s all this now about divisions and swords?

These words of Christ promising division and swords are troubling and confusing to many Christians. So troubling that they choose to gloss over these words of their Savior or do mental gymnastics to get around them. But here they are, right on the same pages of God’s Word that promises, imparts, and promotes peace: the promise of division and sword. And it’s not fair to cherry- pick the words about peace and just quote those while ignoring words like these or adding artificial sweetener.

Jesus’ promise of division and swords may trouble us all the more when we note that he does not say he will cut and divide natural-born enemies. Jesus says that he has come to divide people who otherwise love each other deeply: fathers and sons, mothers and daughters, people who live under the same roof and break the same bread. Even for these Jesus promises sword and division, sword and division that he brings.

In order to understand how these apparently contradictory promises of peace and division fit together, we need to hear some more of Jesus’ words. Jesus says, **“I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”** Jesus states as clearly as possible that he is the way – the only way – for human beings to come to the Father, to be one with him, and to live with him in heaven. It is Jesus. His blood. His righteousness. Him and him alone. He is the only hope of salvation that human beings have.

But, of course, there are many human beings who simply do not accept Jesus as the one true Savior, the only path to the Father, the only hope of eternal life. Billions believe the lie that their own good works will win them God's favor, and earn them everlasting life. They all express the lie a little differently, but in the end it comes out about the same: you don't need Jesus to be right with God. You have to do it for yourself, by keeping our set of rules. There are in reality two religions in the world: Christ; and Earn It By Keeping Our Rules.

And, of course, there is a growing number of people on our planet who believe there is no God at all. A growing minority believes that there is no life to come. So there is no point in believing anything about how to get there.

So there are those who believe Jesus is the one true Savior. And there are those who don't, either because they want to earn heaven or because they think heaven is a mirage. These two groups are divided by what they believe. Jesus causes divisions because he is the only way to heaven, and he divides those who believe it from those who do not. When Jesus proclaims himself the only way to heaven, he drops a sword of division between those who believe and those who do not.

Often this division brings tension and conflict between those who follow the way, the truth, and the life, and those who do not. Those who do not trust in Christ resent the idea that Jesus is the one way to heaven. In their view, it is arrogant to believe we know the only way. It is pigheaded to say that all other religions, which teach people to earn heaven, are a lie. It is rude to tell a person who does not believe in God that they will one day find out how very wrong they are, and be sorry for it. This division and resentment can lead to harsh words, and, sometimes, even harsher actions. Even among the very closest of friends. Even among family members.

And not only that, but Christ also divides those who do trust in him. In the United States today, there are over 3,000 Christian denominations, including over 30 different brands of Lutherans, 80 different styles of Baptists, 20 different kinds of Methodists, 10 different Presbyterian fellowships, and countless non-denominational churches. Why all these divisions among those who *do* believe in Jesus? Isn't it bad enough that Christians are divided from non-Christians? Why are we Christians divided from each other?

The night before he died on the cross, Jesus knelt in the Garden of Gethsemane and prayed a remarkable prayer. In his prayer, Jesus asked the Father to unify all of his followers throughout all time. He prayed for the Father to make all Christians one, totally united, perfectly at peace. And then he said, **"Sanctify"** (which mean "make holy") **"them by the truth. Your word is truth."** As Jesus prayed for all Christians to be united and peaceful, he prayed for the Father to bring them together in the truth of his Word.

When Christians agree on the truth of God's Word, they are truly united and at peace. But when they do not, they are divided. And when they do not agree on the truth of God's Word, they should admit that they are divided.

Jesus calls the Word "your Word." It belongs to God, not to us. The Holy Spirit inspired every word, every thought, every idea. None of it is expendable. No Christian has the right to twist any of it, turn it, or ignore

the parts they don't like. It's God's Word. His truth. He tells us to proclaim it, preach it, and teach it as it is.

So when Christian churches stray from the truth of God's Word, divisions result. Those who stand for the truth must stand apart from those who do not. And so Christians, who should be united on the full truth of Word, are fractured.

And this creates awkwardness and tension between different groups of Christian. Instead of working together, worshipping together, and evangelizing together, there is division and conflict even among Christians.

Are you starting to see why Jesus says that he comes to bring conflict and division? When you are the only way to heaven, you divide those who believe in you from those who do not. When you insist that God's Word is truth, you divide those who hold to it from those who do not.

And now, a brief timeout. If I could stop right here and read the minds of everyone here today, I am pretty sure I know what I'd find between most of your ears right now. A lot of you probably stopped listening about ten minutes ago, as soon as you heard the words "sword" and "division." And most of the rest of you, the precious few still paying attention, are probably thinking something along these lines: "Who cares? Why are you telling us? Why did I burn gas and time to spend my morning hearing about sword and division?"

If you stopped paying attention a while ago, or you don't see the point to all this, I think I know why. We don't like division and tension and conflict. At least most of us are non-confrontational, soft-spoken, kind, and peace-preferring people. So we like the story of the angels singing "Peace on earth." We like to hear Jesus say, "My peace I leave with you." Those kinds of words are what Christianity should be all about.

We don't want division. We don't want conflict. We don't even want to hear about it. We want peace. So much so that Christians are too willing to pursue it at any cost. And that's a problem. We Christians are losing our nerve, our backbone. We are losing our willingness to be divided for the sake of Christ and his truth.

We hear it all time: "All religions are the same; they're just a bunch of different roads leading to the same God. All people of all religions should come together in what they have in common." And we don't want division. We don't want conflict. We want peace! So we let that idea fly around without objection, without confrontation. We may even start to let it draw us in.

We hear it all the time: "The differences between Christian churches are so minor. It's just one guy's interpretation against another guy's. It doesn't really matter. All Christians should just come together in the beliefs that they do share." And we don't want division. We don't want conflict. We want peace! So we let that idea fly without objection, without confrontation. We may even let it draw us in.

And make no mistake. If you love peace enough to go along with those ideas, you will have peace. If you do not object to "All religions lead to the same God" you will have peace with more people. You will feel more peaceful. You will have less tension among friends and family. If you do not object to "Christian is

Christian is Christian” you will have peace with more people. You will feel more peaceful. You will have less tension among friends and family.

That peace with others you want so bad, you will have. But your peace with God will be in jeopardy. And the peace you have with others will not be true and honest.

God promises his peace – the forgiveness of sins, the hope of heaven – only to those who trust in Christ. Jesus did not speak words of peace to those who rejected his truth – only to his disciples, who did believe in him. Peace with God comes through Christ alone. Christ alone, the very truth that divides believers from unbelievers, makes you right with God. So you can’t have it both ways. Either you have peace with God and division from those who do not, or you have peace with them and not with God.

And the same principle is in place when it comes to our relationship with Christians of other denominations. We can have peace and unity with them, if we are willing to compromise the Word of God. But it is the Word of God that teaches our salvation, that shows us the way, the truth, and the life. It is that Word where we find the peace of God and the promise of heaven. If we sacrifice or compromise Christ’s Word to achieve outward peace with other Christians, we begin to lose the Word that gives us peace with God.

And peace with God is the most important peace there is.

Peace with God through Christ takes all human sin away and leads to the glory of heaven. Even as Jesus promised division and sword, he made another promise: **“But I have a baptism to undergo, and how distressed I am until it is finished!”** Jesus was staring a baptism of fire in the face. He was about to undergo a baptism of suffering and death, to pay for the world’s sins. This is the reminder he makes right before promising sword and division: I die for you. It is worth being divided from the unbelieving world, because in my suffering and death you are at peace with God.

And it is worth holding to every part of his Word, even when it means division from other Christians. Because then you will hold every ounce of peace that God intends for you have with him; because you will have the pure Word, and all the peace of God it proclaims. And on top of that, you will be able to stand in honest peace with those Christians who stand together in God’s truth.

For all he says about division and sword, Jesus’ promises of peace stand. For those willing to be divided from unbelief and stand with him, true peace with God is theirs. For those willing to stand for all of his Word, all the peace the Word has to offer is theirs. Jesus divides, too. So be willing to be divided, for the sake of peace with God, and true peace with fellow believers. Amen.