

Isaiah 5:1-7
Hebrews 11:29-12:2
Luke 12:49-56

Jesus has some harsh words today. Frightening. And not at all consistent with who we know Jesus to be – the Prince of Peace. He says, “Do you think I have come to bring peace? No, I tell you, but rather division!” He then goes on to talk about division in a family: “Father against son; mother against daughter; in-laws against each other.” Nothing cuts as close as family. Probably for most people, the lives of our closest blood relatives are worth as much as – possibly even more than – our own.

We can understand what Jesus was getting at if we know something about change. Nobody likes change except a baby. In the scientific world, change is a big deal!

Most people know a common law of physics: For every action there is an opposite and equal reaction. Do you know a common law of chemistry? Every equation must balance. Both of these laws are about equilibrium – the ability to manage change. In the living body this law is called homeostasis. If the body is imbalanced with, say, too many or too few hormones, white blood cells, insulin and so on, disease occurs. The body is constantly maintaining the process of homeostasis. The universe, it seems, operates on a principle of equilibrium.

Oddly enough, this principle is at work also in human psychology. Who knew? Equilibrium works in how we relate to others, especially in our established groups, like families.

In the family, if one individual seeks to change, others in the family will seek to resist that change to maintain the family as it’s always been.¹ It’s like the man who told his friend, “My brother thinks he’s a chicken.” The friend says, “Why don’t you tell him he’s not a chicken.” And the first man says, “Well, we would, but we need the eggs.”

Equilibrium. The brother may be crazy; but that family has adapted to his insanity. They don’t want it to change. They need the eggs.

This helps explain why we have conditions like co-dependency. In a co-dependent family, one person *under functions*, perhaps due to significant drug or alcohol use. Because of equilibrium, others in the family *over function* to even things out. Perhaps they make excuses for the impaired individual, or try to hide the problem, or even lie about why that one isn’t functioning at work or elsewhere.

If one individual in a family seeks to change, other members will resist that change – unconsciously. If the situation becomes too fraught, the family may break apart. Unless another factor is at work. It is the factor of self-differentiation.

This is emotional maturity. It is knowing where I end and you begin. The self-differentiated person has a good lock on being a more separate self while still maintaining good contact with others. In a way, it’s something like “tough love.”

¹ See “Bowen Family Systems Theory.”

Tough love allows the consequence of one's actions to fall where it should. Certainly, we want to protect our kids and grandkids from some of the arbitrary consequences of life. But if we make a habit of rescuing, covering up, creating secrets, we end up harming both the one we love and ourselves.

Tough love causes us pain. And it causes others pain. And it causes division: father against son; mother against daughter. "You know your sister has a shoplifting problem. Why didn't you offer to pay for the necklace?"

That is not the kind of life Jesus wants for us, or for anyone in that example: the shoplifter, her mother, her sister. The whole family is conspiring to "keep the peace" at any cost. This is not a healthy system and it is not the kind of life Jesus wants for any of us. He says, "I have come to give you life," and "the truth will set you free." When one of us begins to live into these promises, others may resist us. Change can bring division.

But change is what the spiritual life is all about. We are changed from dead to alive. We are changed from lost to found. We move from being mostly self-centric to God-centric; to caring about others; loving our neighbor; learning to forgive. God wants us to be transformed into something that looks a lot like Jesus. We are meant to think like Jesus; talk like Jesus; love the way he loves.

The message we hear today about division – even between loved ones – is a provocative sighting of the Otherness of God. We Humans are content with a measure of peace. For some, it is little more than an ongoing cease-fire. There are endless compromises they make – with themselves, mostly – to keep the peace with those around them. That is not God's peace. It may be the best that Human can do but it's like swimming in a bathtub. God is the ocean.

God's peace is called *shalom*. In the New Testament it is described as the peace that passes understanding. This is a peace that Human cannot concoct or conjure up. It is divine. And it is ours as we increasingly reorder our lives to align with the God's Word.

Throughout the Old Testament God calls for justice. It is the baseline of relationship with God. Today we read, "God expected justice, but saw bloodshed; God expected righteousness but heard a cry." The New Testament adds to that baseline the necessity to care and to share.

Have we comfortable American Christians developed ways of insulating ourselves from the voice of God? Can we hear God calling us above the din of our own self-focused lives? The call – louder today than ever before – is to repair the world in justice and peace.

If Jesus today says that he comes to bring division rather than peace, it is the division between good and evil; between light and dark; between what is phony and what is *real*. What is *real* is the *shalom* of God that replaces a phony peace for one that passes understanding.