



Sermon for the Tenth Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 15
Rev. Jonathan Stepp
August 18, 2019

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

A Scotsman moved to a small town in America and set up shop as a house painter. The local Episcopal Church Wardens hired him to repaint the church and he was happy to take the job – but to save money and increase his profits he had developed the practice of thinning his paint with water so it would go farther. No sooner had he started work on the top of the church’s bell tower than dark storm clouds began to gather in the sky. Suddenly a lightning bolt fell from the heavens, struck the painter, and knocked him off his scaffolding and onto the ground. As he groggily looked up to the sky he heard a voice boom from above: “repaint, repaint, and thin no more.”

This Sunday’s joke serves not only as an intro to the sermon but also as an advertisement for the men’s breakfast on Wednesday mornings. Don told us this one last week – so if you come to the men’s breakfast you’ll get to hear high quality jokes like this.

Repentance – not repainting – is never easy and this morning’s gospel text reminds us once again of this truth. We primarily think of Jesus and his message to the world as a message about peace and love. And that is true. Jesus is the revelation to us of peace between God and humanity and the revelation of God’s abiding and enduring love for us. Jesus is the revelation that God loves us more than we love ourselves.

Then we come to passages like today’s gospel text and we may be thrown into confusion. Jesus literally confronts us with a message that seems to contradict what we believe about him when he asks us “Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth?” And then answers his own question by crying out, “No, I tell you, but rather division!” These can be troubling and difficult words – yet another set of sayings from Jesus in the Gospel of Luke that we sometimes call “hard sayings” because they are hard to hear and hard to interpret.

I believe that part of the challenge we face is the challenge to understand what love and peace really are. If we aren’t careful, we can come to believe that the love and peace of God are free of conflict and confronta-

tion. That love means never experiencing conflict and that peace means never facing confrontations that have to be resolved. Such a view of love and peace has says more about our own fears than it does about who God is or how the world really works.

We need look no further than our own families to see clearly what Jesus is talking about. In fact, Jesus expressly calls our attention to family dynamics in this text by speaking of fathers and sons, mothers and daughters. Our parents, our children, our brothers and sisters, and our spouses are the people we love the most dearly in the world. They are also the people with whom we have the most arguments, the most confrontations, and the most conflicts. By its very nature loving relationship includes conflict and confrontation.

That's because the opposite of love is not hate. The opposite of love is indifference.

If I walk into Motor Company Grill this afternoon for lunch and the guy at the table next to me is rude enough to say he doesn't like my shoes I laugh at him and go on about my day. Because I am indifferent to him. Whatever love I might feel for him is of a very general, vague sense – a kind of love for my fellow human beings in which I wish them well and hope they don't suffer. But if Beth or Lewis or Emily say they don't like my shoes – well that's a whole other thing entirely, isn't it? Because I love them and they love me. Our mutual love means that we take each other seriously, that we try to truly listen to each other, and that when potential conflict or confrontation arises we engage with it, discuss it, and seek to resolve it.

So it is in our relationship with God. God loves us passionately and therefore takes us seriously. And we love God and therefore we take him seriously. And when people love each other and take each other seriously it means that they are engaged in relationship – not indifferent – and that engagement sometimes brings about conflict and confrontation.

It is within this understanding of love – the understanding that love means engaging and taking the other person seriously – that Jesus speaks these words today. The revelation of God that Jesus brings into the world is a revelation of peace and love that is serious, significant, and powerful. It is a revelation that challenges what we think we know, that challenges our cultural presuppositions, and ultimately calls us to repent. It calls us to change our minds about God, ourselves, and our fellow human beings and begin to think in a new way about who we are and what life is about.

A revelation that is that serious, that real, and that loving cannot help but create a certain amount of conflict and confrontation. Consider three realms of life in which the revelation of God in Christ might bring about conflict and confrontation for us:

First is conflict within ourselves. Perhaps Jesus calls me to abandon some cherished belief I have held since childhood. This calling sets up a conflict between the adult I am today and the child that I was. Or perhaps Jesus calls me to return to some positive attitude I held as a child and have allowed the cares of adulthood to strip away from me. Again, a conflict is set up between the adult I am today and the child that I was. As Jesus says: the adult and the child are turned against each other.

Second is conflict within our families. Perhaps Jesus calls me to participate in a ministry, or support a cause, or speak out on an issue in a way that my family members can't – or refuse to – understand. Conflict might arise because some members of my family might prefer that I remain the person that I used to be, the person they wanted me to be, instead of growing into the person that Christ is calling me to be. And again, parents and children, brothers and sisters, could be against each other.

Finally, there is conflict within the Church. Too often we make the mistake of thinking that being loving and peaceful in the Church means never rocking the boat. If something is controversial or difficult we should just shy away from it for the sake of peace – but if we stop to think for a moment we realize that such avoidance is actually a false imitation of love and peace. It isn't real, it isn't serious, and it doesn't have the substance of authentic love. Authentic love and authentic peace cannot flow from indifference. They can only flow from serious, meaningful engagement with others.

We have seen this time and again in the Episcopal Church over the recent decades. Because we took seriously the Biblical statement that there is neither male nor female in Christ we began to ordain women to the priesthood in the 1970s. The result was conflict such as Jesus describes in today's text because we were taking seriously our commitment to love as Christ loves.

Later, in the 1990s and early 2000s, as we moved to fully include gay and transgender people in the life of the Church, we faced conflict again. And again it was the sort of conflict that Jesus describes in today's Gospel because we were taking seriously our commitment to love as Christ loves.

Now, as our Bishops take seriously the Biblical statements that all people are made in God's image and redeemed by Christ, they are speaking out against gun violence and calling for immigrants and refugees to be

treated with dignity and respect. And again it causes the kind of conflict that Jesus describes. Conflict that arises because the Episcopal Church continues to take seriously our commitment to love others as Christ has loved us.

But here's the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ: on the other side of conflict and confrontation lies a world much brighter and better than we could have ever imagined. On the other side of conflict our families are more loving, our churches more inclusive, and our society is stronger. And ultimately, on the other side of all the conflict, struggle, and confrontation of this life is the life of the world to come where the authentic love and peace of Christ reign forever.

Amen.