

## **“Making Sense of Jesus’ Strange Words of Division”**

**Luke 12:49–56**

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Most of us have family members and friends we treat with kid gloves. We avoid certain subjects with them because we know how they will react, and it will not be good. To a certain extent, this has always been the case. Dana had an uncle who raised his hand to hit her during a Christmas visit because he saw her books on Russian history and concluded that she had become a communist. Her interest was in pre-revolution Russian history. So, if he had called her a tzarist, that would have been fair. But he was one of those people who saw communists around every corner. He channeled the spirit of Joseph McCarthy!

I have family members like this too, but it’s more fun to talk about Dana’s family members... We have always had to tip-toe around some people in our inner circles. And yet, it is different now, and not for the better. We dread family get-togethers, and not just because of the creepy uncle. People have always had differences, but now they lead to deep divisions, and there is no common ground. To make matters worse, we can’t avoid the subject where a different view is offensive because they insist on talking about it! Ideas and beliefs, often misinformed, have become more important than people and relationships. So, family members cut off ties with each other, friends end friendships, people leave churches over single issues, and no one seems to have a remedy.

Quite surprisingly, in today’s readings, we find a reflection of this reality. Jesus, the one we call the prince of peace, the reconciler of all differences and divisions, says, “Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but division! From now on five in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three...” And then, he goes on to name various division —fathers and sons, mothers and daughters, mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law— though I’m not sure he gets full credit for the latter. But we get the picture. Jesus says he creates divisions.

What in the world is going on here? It seems odd for Jesus, completely out of character. In fact, the entire passage seems odd. Jesus talks about bringing fire to the earth, he talks about his baptism in a strange way, and then he chastises the people of his time for their limited capacity for discernment. So much for the teacher, healer, and encourager we have come to know! Is Jesus having a bad day? Did the disciples get on his last nerve... again? What is going on here?

It all begins with a simple statement found in Luke 9:51, “When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem.” This isn’t an ordinary entry in a travelogue. It is a major shift in the narrative about Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection. For Jesus to be “taken up” means on a cross and in the resurrection. The early chapters of Luke tell the story of Jesus’ birth, baptism, calling, and early ministry, but from this point forward, he is headed toward the city where he will die on a cross. Everything now points in that direction. In fact, the baptism he speaks of in our reading is this experience of suffering, death, and resurrection, not his immersion in water.

So, there is a different tone to the narrative, a heightened urgency, but exactly how fire is involved may not be clear. We think of fires as being destructive. The apartment my mother and I lived in when I was little in Fayetteville caught on fire when Mom was cooking tater tots, and though the fire was mostly out when the firetruck arrived, it was still a terrifying experience that gave me nightmares. I didn’t eat tater tots for quite some time, which led David Tyndall to question my North Carolina roots, well, along with my pronunciation of the word “pecan.”

But fire is no joking matter, it is terrifying; yet the fire Jesus speaks of is not the destructive fire of judgment but the redemptive fire of purification, like a refiner’s fire purifying precious metals. Several weeks ago, we read a text where the disciples wanted to command a destructive fire to come down from heaven and consume some Samaritans who did not receive Jesus, but Jesus rebuked them. This kind of fire was not his “jam,” to use a term our daughter introduced me to. The fire he wants to kindle is the one that leads to healing, and rather than imposing pain on others, he is the one who will suffer.

All this helps shed light on some of Jesus' difficult words, but how does this lead to the division among family members he describes? They will be divided by their varied responses to him. Some will claim him as Savior and Lord in light of his death and resurrection while others will not. Some will embrace his calling to follow him in a life of service and sacrificial love while others will not. These are not superficial issues, especially in the early church. The stakes are high, people die for their faith, compromise is not an option. Either you believe in Jesus and risk it all for him or you do not! And those who are not with us are against us. Jesus does not intend to divide people, but division is a natural consequence of the varied responses to who he is.

Perhaps this also sheds some light on why Jesus chastises people at the end of the reading for lacking discernment. They know how to predict the weather, but they don't know how to interpret the present time, make sense of history, see what God is up to in the world.

They don't get what Jesus is doing. His own disciples will tell him he is crazy for talking about suffering and death. No one gets it until after the fact. So, perhaps a little chastisement is in order. He is not trying to shame them. He is calling them to greater awareness and deeper understanding so that they may embrace him and his mission.

This sheds light on Jesus' strange words in our text, but what is the message for us? In part, it is a reflection of our time when there are deep divisions over things that matter. Some disputes are not worth the trouble, they are over inane things like paint color and team loyalty, hair length and body piercings, ego and pride. We may care about these things and have strong opinions, but we don't lose friends and cut off family members because of them, at least not if we have any sense. But who Jesus is matters immensely for us and the world in which we live.

Among those who claim the name "Christian" today, people do not disagree about whether they believe in Jesus, but there are tremendous differences in how they view him, in what they believe about him, and thus how they live and what policies they support.

A writer for Baptist News Global posted an article this week about two friends who have been terrorized by our government. One is a man

who hid in his closet when ICE knocked on his door. He was born in this country and has one Anglo parent and one Latinx parent, but his last name is Latinx. So, he lives in fear. The agents might have had the wrong door, but who knows? He didn't want to risk it. The other friend is woman with an LGBT child who posted a message about having left the country permanently to protect her child. She wants to fight for her beliefs, but the safety of her child is her highest priority.

What do either of these issues have to do with Jesus? Nothing... and everything... because a certain kind of religious ideation is fueling current policies while a different kind of religious ideation is fighting against them every way possible. Jesus never addressed LGBT issues at all, though he embraced the marginalized repeatedly, but he certainly addressed immigration. In the parable of the sheep and goats found in Matthew 25, those who end up on the good side of the ledger in eternity welcome the stranger in the land, the alien, the immigrant.

Yet many people who claim to believe in Jesus express hostility toward immigrants, especially if they have dark skin, and they do so, they say, because of their faith, not in spite of it! And while some seek to embrace LGBT people, in the Spirit of Jesus, with compassion and understanding, others insist that their faith in Jesus requires them to view LGBT people as sinners who need to repent, distortions of God's design.

At least on this last issue, we have no Jesus material to go on, one could make a case for different perspectives, though with no certainty of being in synch with Jesus. But regarding the stranger in the land, there is plenty of Jesus and Bible that argues for one perspective... But the point is this—people have very strong yet very different perspectives on what the mind of Christ is on various issues that affect real people every day. It is not surprising that we have deep divisions.

But our reading doesn't just reflect the divided nature of our time over things that matter, it sheds light on the limited nature of our discernment. As in the days of Jesus, we are better with the weather than we are with seeing where God is at work. A part of the problem is that we have moved away from established sources of information and started consuming unreflectively all sorts of nonsense and then re-

posting it or verbally spreading it. But another part is that most people aren't willing to do the work of getting informed on any subject - history, economics, geography, science, religion. If you take in garbage, but aren't informed enough to know it is garbage, you spread garbage.

At the very least, we should take seriously the religious part of this. There is no excuse today for having distorted views about Muslims and thus empowering Islamophobia. There are too many good books, including those written by our own Charles Kimball. But it's not just other faiths about which we need to be better informed. It is our own. CBF Founding Coordinator Cecil Sherman told a number of us at a conference a story from his time as pastor of Broadway Baptist Church in Fort Worth, Texas. A prominent leader came out the door one Sunday and said, "Dr. Sherman, that was a great sermon! There are two people I love to hear preach—you and Dr. Criswell (as in W. A. Criswell)."

Many things have led to our limited capacity for spiritual discernment, but in Marilynne Robinson's novel *Gilead* an older minister laments the effect radio has had on his ministry, even more so television. "You can spend forty years teaching people to be awake to the fact of mystery and then some fellow with no more theological sense than a jackrabbit gets himself a radio ministry and all your work is forgotten. I do wonder where it will end (p. 208)." We know the answer to that—with pundits and influencers eating away at our ability to think.

So, we are divided about things that matter, including who Jesus is, and people's views are often poorly informed, but how does this help us? Is there any good news here? Well, it's about as easy to find as the good news in the reading from Isaiah is, but the Jesus story is one of redemption. The fire he brings is intended to purify, not destroy. And the first step toward healing is realizing we are sick and exactly how we are sick. We can't address a problem until it is accurately identified.

The text holds up a mirror to some of our greatest challenges and the consequences they bring, and this much alone is helpful. We need to acknowledge our differences, get better informed, and try to understand why others believe the things they do. Our differences won't magically go away or pale in significance, but who said following Jesus was easy?