

“All In the Family”
Luke 12:49-56

Rev. Liz Miller
August 18, 2013

When thinking about friendships, and even relationships, one of the things we often hear is that no one person can fulfill all of your needs. It's one of the reasons why, even after we find our dream person and settle down together, we maintain and develop friendships with other people. So if we love nascar races, but our spouse doesn't care about cars and doesn't understand the thrill of watching them drive in a circle—we can have a friend who does. Or we can have one friend who we know will always be up for a Saturday morning hike, and another who will always be up for a Saturday night on the town. Some people are great at listening to our feelings and helping us process what we are going through, while others are better at helping us forget our woes by making us laugh and cheering us up. We like to talk about the different gifts we have, and that plays into relationships as well. I have even heard people describe the people in their life by the gift they offer or role they play: that is Kevin, my biking friend, that is Frank, my shopping friend, and that is Sherrie, my foodie friend.

If you haven't thought about the people in your life in this way before, it's an interesting exercise. It can bring about newfound appreciation and gratitude for the uniqueness of the people we love as we reflect and better understand what role they play in our life. I believe that this exercise and idea can move beyond the people we spend time with and extend to thinking about the role Jesus plays in our life. After all, one of our favorite traditional hymns proclaims, “What a friend we have in Jesus!” If we look at the message in that hymn alone, we would come to understand that Jesus is someone

whom we can take refuge in and who will offer us solace. Jesus is someone whom we can hand our burdens to, who offers peace and comfort in the midst of pain and struggles. These images and ideas of Jesus extend to the other ways we commonly describe him: Jesus offers us love and mercy, Jesus represents kindness and hope and joy and peace. These are the words that I have heard you all describe Jesus and his role in your life and in your faith.

Hold onto those images of Jesus, and let's talk about the flip side of understanding people as fulfilling certain roles. The flip side, is that as truly helpful as it can be to understand the roles that people play, and just when we start to rely on one person in a particular way, they can surprise us by not being what we have come to expect. So we might call the friend we count on to sympathize with our problems, and they might say, "That doesn't sound so bad! Cheer up already!" Or we might call our Nascar buddy only to find out that they have moved on to Formula 1 racing, and aren't looking back. When we begin to expect things of people, and they do something else or change their ways, it can bring up a range of emotions: surprise, confusion, disappointment, and even hurt.

That about describes the progression of emotions I experienced when I read today's words from Jesus, whom we have come to see as the bearer of peace, the proclaimer of love and justice, and the great unifier. Jesus, our trusted friend and confidant whom we know we can turn to when we are troubled and weary. That same Jesus, in today's reading, throws us for a real loop. There doesn't seem to be much peace, love, or comfort when he says, "Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division!" Oh dear. So much for that convenient peaceful role we try so hard to keep him in.

There is no denying that there seems to be a disparity between this message of division and discord among family members, and the rest of Jesus' messages. For example, the Gospel of Luke begins with the proclamation that Jesus will "guide our feet into the way of peace" (1:79) and at the end of the same Gospel, Jesus appears to his followers and leaves them with the parting message, "Peace be with you" (24:36). In between these verses, we hear example after example of Jesus feeding crowds, healing woman and men, bringing the dead back to life, and cleansing lepers.

These are the comforting, classic images of Jesus that help us form our ideas of who Jesus is...but it is that same Gospel of Luke that presents this image of Jesus as one who will divide father against son, daughter against mother, and mother-in-law against daughter-in-law. (I wonder if this is the earliest recorded setup for a joke about in-laws...Another thing I never would have suspected Jesus of doing!)

The way that I have come to understand these two disparate images of the same Jesus is by dividing them into messages that prescriptive and messages that are descriptive. When Jesus proclaims peace and when he encourages people to love one another in radical ways, he is *prescribing* a new way of life for them. He prescribes generosity and compassion so that we might be in better relationship with one another and with God. He prescribes inclusion and care of the poor in order to make the world a better place—in order to help us live out the Kingdom of God on this earth. When we evoke these messages that are so familiar and loved, we are naming our goal and we are naming who we are striving be. He understands that peace and love are not how humans always ground ourselves, and so he prescribes a new foundation for us—a prescription that offers hope, wholeness, and healing.

In comparison, when Jesus talks of the divisions in families that he brings, it is more of a description of the way things are. Who has not experienced discord with their family? Who has not experienced discord with their friends or their coworkers? With their community, or even with their church or people in their church? Division is what too often defines us. We are quick to separate ourselves, we are quick to judge, we are quick to define ourselves as us versus them. Perhaps Jesus' words sting so much, or catch us so off guard, because they are uncomfortably familiar. We often turn to Jesus to be our beacon of hope, and our saving grace, but in this moment, he is holding up the mirror and describing what he sees around him the world.

Describing things as they are in the moment is often more difficult than looking to the way things could potentially be, but these two things must go hand in hand. Facing the divisions that exist among us, being real about the discord and the distance that exists is necessary before we can move to a place of healing and connectedness. Without this description of the divisions that existed in the world, and indeed still exist in our lives, any feeling of peace that we can find is really a false peace. In order to achieve true peace and wholeness, or true reconciliation with those we are divided from, we must first be honest about the divisions that occur. We have to face ourselves, and our own realities, before we can begin to envision what that peace might look like.

I think that as a culture, we like to believe that denial and avoidance are helpful coping mechanisms. We are used to presenting our best selves as our only selves. All around us, we witness people projecting images of perfection and bliss out into the world, causing us to try to create that same impression of our own lives. It's exhausting. This is especially true in the example that gives us in this passage: family. It is still impeccably

relevant today. For many of us, family is the aspect in our life we most feel the pressure to create peace and love in, or at least the *image* of absolute peace and love. Young parents feel pressured to have endless patience for their toddlers, other parents feel like they are too quick to criticize their teenagers, and parents whose kids have long left home feel as if they have to project the image of high achieving children out in the world, who keep in touch and care as much as if they were still in the next room.

And for children, be we young or grown, even when we have that nagging feeling of guilt that we aren't doing enough for our parents or aren't patient or kind enough to them, we will more readily tell the world otherwise—professing the perfection of our relationships with our mothers and the respect and adoration with have for our fathers. There is nothing wrong with these images—they are parts of the wholeness and peace that we work for, that Jesus has prescribed for us, but they are not always reality. Sometimes, a lot of times, families face difficult situations. Parents and children fight. Distance seems to be the best marker. Dysfunction reigns, but we keep it inside, not daring to tell the world that sometimes, our family struggles to be a family. Or sometimes, even though we don't want to, we hurt each other. And, that needs to be okay to. Before we can work on healing our families, and seeking peace for ourselves, we have to be able to face them for what they are.

I believe that when Jesus says he is bringing division to families, he is really saying, “I have the tools to help you create more peace and love in your life and in your families. I will offer you hope and love and mercy and healing. But in order to accept these gifts, you first need to admit that you are not completely okay. That your family is not perfect, and that sometimes they're not even okay. I believe that Jesus is saying, “I

will bring division because I will hold a mirror up and help you look honestly at the mistakes you have made and the history that sometimes feels to painful to face. I will help you face it. I will bring the divisions to the front so we can move forward.” What Jesus is saying is that before he can prescribe a solution, he needs to describe the problem. Before you can accept his prescription, his solution and his peace, you need to face the divisions within yourself. Be honest with yourself, and then, only then, can peace come.