

Proper 15C 2019 Sermon

August 18, 2019

Luke 12:49-56

Jesus said, "I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what stress I am under until it is completed! Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division! From now on five in one household will be divided, 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 mother-in-law."*

He also said to the crowds, "When you see a cloud rising in the west, you immediately say, 'It is going to rain'; and so it happens. And when you see the south wind blowing, you say, 'There will be scorching heat'; and it happens. You hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present time?"

In the 1st-Century Mediterranean culture in which Jesus and his followers lived, one's identity was principally found within the family. Social scientists Malina and Rohrbaugh, commenting on the 1st-Century world of Jesus, state: "Socially and psychologically, all family members were embedded in the family unity. Modern individualism simply did not exist..."¹ "[T]he extended family meant everything. It not only was the source of one's honor status in the community but also functioned as the primary economic, religious, educational, and social network. Loss of connection to the family meant the loss of these vital networks..."²

Into this family-centered system enters Jesus, and he calls some of his first disciples to leave their nets and their father – both family and occupation – to follow him.³ It is a radical re-orienting of where they will now find their **principal** identity: *not* in relationship to their biological family or to their occupation, but in relationship to Jesus, the embodiment of God on earth.

We see this challenge to a family-based identity *earlier* in Luke's gospel, when someone comes to Jesus and says, "Your mother and your brothers are standing outside..." and Jesus responds, "My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it."⁴ And *later* in Luke's Gospel, Jesus says, "Whoever comes to me and does not *hate* father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters... **cannot** be my disciple."⁵

Now let us keep in mind that hyperbole was a common rabbinic teaching technique: using shocking exaggeration to drive a point home (like when Jesus

says, “If your hand offends you, cut it off!”).⁶ Nevertheless, Jesus uses this technique quite sparingly, reserving it for times when he feels very strongly about something. And in today’s Gospel, Jesus is saying that those who make the decision to follow him will have to re-orient their primary identities and relationships, and this will inevitably cause divisions within the arena where one’s primary identity had traditionally been found: the biological family.

Now, it’s important to note that the words of Jesus in today’s Gospel are not *prescriptive*, but *descriptive*: Jesus is not *advocating* divisions within families! Rather, he is honestly stating the **fact** that when one truly becomes his follower, one’s biological family is no longer the center of one’s identity, which upsets the status quo. Fr. John Shea notes that today’s Gospel text does not focus on the *teaching* of Jesus, but on its *effects*. He writes: “The revelation of God in Jesus makes an absolute claim on people, and any claims that compete with it must be abandoned...”⁷

Which made me ask myself the question: Does the revelation of God in Jesus make such a claim on **my** life? Does it so define **my** identity that no *other* claim or identity competes with it? Or do I so strongly identify with my family, my self-image, my ego, or my occupation that one of *these* becomes my **principle** identity, rather than who I am in God?

Jesus’ words in today’s Gospel compel us to ask: What are some of the rival claims on *our* identity in our world today? We have noted that, in the society of Jesus’ day, one’s principal identity was found in one’s biological family. But I wonder if that hasn’t changed in *our* society in *our* day? Last November and December, there were a plethora of articles written about how family members with differing political attachments might get along at Thanksgiving Dinner or during the Christmas holidays – the implication being that one’s political identification might be stronger than one’s family identification, and cause rifts in the family. Observing the news stories of our day, we might conclude that many people today find their principal identity *not* in their biological family *or* in their identity in God, but rather in their race, their political group or candidate, their nation, or some “cause” they see as “righteous”.

Recent research has shown that, while yes, we Americans *are* divided on issues, that is **not** the source of our *principal* division. An article published last year in *Scientific American* was titled: “How Identity, Not Issues, Explains the Partisan Divide.”⁸ Researchers have found that Americans today are no more divided on policy issues than we were 30 years ago, and in the case of some issues such as gay rights, we are more united.⁹ But in our present time, there is more of what researchers call “**affect** polarization” – an increase in our negative feelings about people who identify with the “other” group.¹⁰ The fact that *identity* is more important than *issues* helps explain why political office holders or political candidates can change their views or positions on issues (sometimes completely!) and not lose their followers, their “base.” The strong **feelings** about group

identity remain. In a recent article titled, “Ideologues Without Issues: The Polarizing Consequences of Ideological Identities,”¹¹ University of Maryland professor Lilliana Mason distinguished between two separate aspects of political ideology — “**issue**-based” (defined by what one believes about the issues) and “**identity**-based” (defined by one’s social identity or party affiliation). Dr. Mason found that by far the more potent predictor of social distance was **identity**-based ideology — how we **identify** ourselves as Democrats or Republicans or liberals or conservatives — *not* where we stand on the issues. “For much of the voting public,” the article states, “political affiliation isn’t so much about the *issues* as it is about being part of ‘Team Red’ and ‘Team Blue.’ ...As [an NYU philosophy professor] recently put it, ‘**all** politics is *identity* politics.’” In 1960, about 5% of Americans said they would be “displeased” if their child married someone outside their political party; 50 years later, in 2010, about 40% said they would be “upset” if their child married someone of the other political party – an increase of 35%.¹² It has also been found that there is, in our country today, an increasing trend: More and more people do not want to *live* next to people of the “other” political party, or to be their friends.¹³ This is all a matter of differences in group *identity*, not differences in issues or policies.

My friends, the question which our Gospel raises, a question I think we all need to ask ourselves, is: “Where does my *principal identification* lie? Do I find my principal identity in my family? In “Team Red” or “Team Blue”? In my nationality, ethnic or socio-economic group, ego self or self-image? Or do I find my overriding identity in God, in whose image I (and every other human being on the face of this earth) was made?¹⁴ In fact, I think that may be one of **the** most important questions for people of faith to ask themselves in our day. For as I said in my sermon 3 weeks ago, given the constant bombardment of campaign messages and “news stories” which are heavily partisan and which denigrate others, and given online environments which function as (to use the words of one researcher) “immense polarization machines,”¹⁵ enabling individuals to select their information sources and filter out challenging or unfamiliar messages, if we don’t intentionally *limit* the amount of time we expose ourselves to these polarizing inputs, and counter it with sufficient time in prayer and connecting with God, then our primary identity is probably going to be formed around our nation, our political party or candidate, our race, or some “righteous” cause. This is the very reason that Richard Rohr established the Center for Action and Contemplation over 30 years ago: he saw that good-intentioned people could all-too-easily become overly angry and confrontational if they were not steeped in contemplative prayer, which re-connects us to our **primary** identity in God – an identity which Jesus insisted supersedes even family.

Dr. David Lose describes why being a follower of Jesus created division in families in Jesus’ day: “To be a follower of the one who accepted and even honored the disreputable meant that *you* needed to do the same, rejecting the easy temptation of judging others and instead inviting them into our lives. To be a

follower of the one who preached love and forgiveness was to practice the same, particularly when it comes to those who differ from you...

“I wonder,” Dr. Lose continues, “if **we** might *also* find *ourselves* thrust into conflict and division with those we care about if we [like Jesus] welcomed into our homes and congregations and social circles those whom society shuns. What would be the reaction of our family and friends and co-workers if we really acted like Jesus did?... [What if we were] to encourage each other to *live like*, not just *believe in*, Jesus?”¹⁶

In one of Richard Rohr’s email devotionals last week, St. Catherine of Genoa was quoted as saying, “My me is God: nor do I know my selfhood except in God.”¹⁷ My “me” is not my family, nor my political party or candidate, nor some “righteous” issue I am stirred up about, nor my ego or personality, nor my occupation, ethnicity, religion, nationality, citizenship, language, or socio-economic class. My me, your me, is God, and we do not know our selfhood except in God. And if we live our lives according to this truth, there **will** be division amongst those we know who believe that *family* should be one’s highest identity, or political party, or nation, or what have you. We need to remind ourselves, over and over – perhaps repeat it like a mantra: “My me is God. My me is God.” And then, perhaps, over a period of time, that will indeed become our principal identity.

AMEN

- 1 Bruce Malina and Richard Rohrbaugh, *Social-Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*, Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1992, p. 179
- 2 *Ibid.*, p. 335
- 3 Matthew 4:21-22; Mark 1:19-20
- 4 Luke 8:20-21
- 5 Luke 14:26
- 6 Matthew 5:30
- 7 John Shea, *The Relentless Widow*, Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2006, p. 229
- 8 Cameron Brick and Sander van der Linden, ScientificAmerican.com, June 19, 2018, “How Identity, Not Issues, Explains the Partisan Divide: New research has disturbing implications”
- 9 Robert B. Talisse, “Political polarization is about feelings, not facts,” *The Conversation*, July 31, 2019
- 10 Joe Pierre, M.D., “Why Has America Become So Divided?: Four reasons the United States doesn’t seem so united anymore,” *Psychology Today*, Sept. 5, 2018
- 11 Lilliana Mason, “Ideologues without Issues: the Polarizing Consequences of Ideological Identities, Oxford Academic, *Public Opinion Quarterly*, Vol. 82, Issue S1, March 21, 2018, pp. 866-887
- 12 David A. Graham, “Really, Would You Let Your Daughter Marry a Democrat?,” *The Atlantic*, Sept. 27, 2012
- 13 Cameron Brick and Sander van der Linden, *ibid.*
- 14 Genesis 1:26-27

- 15 Robert B. Talisse, *ibid.*
- 16 David Lose, *In the Meantime*, “Dear Partner in Preaching,” Aug. 9, 2016
- 17 “An Uncreated Spark,” Thursday, August 15, 2019