

Division in the Name of Peace?

Luke 12: 49-53

“I have come to cast fire upon the earth, and how I wish it were already ablaze! ⁵⁰ I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what constraint I am under until it is completed! ⁵¹ Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division! ⁵² From now on five in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three; ⁵³ 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.”

There is a famous quote about peace from a song in the 60's which says, “Let there be peace on earth and let it begin with me.” When we think of peace, perhaps we think of a calm environment, or tension-free harmony. Perhaps it's the absence of conflict, or a good ol' Kumbaya around the campfire. But when we listen to Jesus we hear him saying the opposite: “Do you think I've come to bring peace? No, I tell you rather division!” It sounds like Jesus is claiming that peace doesn't begin with him! So what do we do with Jesus' disruptive words?

At the outset, it's not the most uplifting passage! I mean, the words don't sound like the Jesus we know. Jesus the cause of division? Jesus one of the reasons we are against each other? That doesn't sound right. After all, don't we claim he is the Prince of Peace. And isn't it the Evil One who we say causes division? I mean, if we were to ask people what their number one prayer for our time is, it would probably be peace and unity. We are tired of the division. We are tired of the violence. We are tired of families being torn apart by lies and extreme ideologies. Yet, here Jesus is claiming he is going to be the new source of division. Is it just me, or does it not sound like the Jesus we know and love?

But what if? What if what Jesus is really doing is rejecting how our world normally achieves peace? What if the kind of peace he is offering is not the same kind of peace we are used to. If we think about how peace and unity are realized in our society—and perhaps every society—it is often at the expense of someone else. Have you ever noticed: groups tend to bond over having someone else to blame! It happens in politics, it happens in churches, it even happens in our families. Typically we have what we call a “black sheep,” or someone in the family who gets blamed for the family's problems. As the Black Sheep becomes the object of the family's grievances, in some distorted way, the family bonds over having a common target. Except, what psychology teaches us is that the Black Sheep is actually a symptom-bearer for the family system, and is acting out the family's issues through their own behavior. And as long as the family has a Black Sheep to focus on, they can remain innocent, not looking at their own issues, and most of all the system doesn't have to go through the painful process of changing. It's projection 101 and we see this same system of scapegoating in politics when immigrants are rallied against, or in churches who focus on scapegoating the LGBTQIA community. And the irony is, that those who unveil this system for what it truly is are deemed “troublemakers”—and scapegoated themselves—because they create disruption to the false unity—whether it be a teacher with a book about race, a preacher in the South during Civil Rights, or a Messiah figure

on the cross. It turns out the way we achieve peace in our world is merely an illusion of peace. And is really no sort of peace at all!

So check out what Jesus is doing here. It's quite remarkable. He says the peace he brings will divide us. It's not that his aim is to divide us for the sake of dividing us. We are more than capable of dividing ourselves without his help. No. It's not that he is going to divide us, it's about *how* he will divide us! Listen: In a household of five, it will be divided three against two, or two against three. And notice the ratios. *He doesn't say it will be divided 4-1 or 1-4.* He doesn't say things will be 5-0, which is what we think "peace" truly is. But Jesus has been around long enough to understand it not how our world operates. There are always going to be differences. Some things won't ever be resolved, because God created a diverse world where we are all different.

Jesus says it is 3-2 or 2-3. You see, from now on things will be as close to equal as possible, power will fluctuate. No one can be over/against another group for too long. No longer will there be a false peace where there are all against one. Why? Because from now on there will always be a disciple of Jesus who is standing with the scapegoat. No more Black Sheeps to carry the system's grievances. No more blaming and shaming the other side. And this is the kind of division, Jesus says, which produces real peace.

Of course the problem is that it doesn't line up with our picture of what peace looks like. Which is why the temptation will always be to relapse into the old system of 4-1 or 1-4. The peace Jesus brings will be extremely disruptive because it means we are going to have to keep working toward justice, keep working toward equity, keep working toward a new unity where tension and disruption and disagreement are all part of how peace is achieved.

Well, if it's going to be 3-2 or 2-3 from now on, how do we interpret which side we stand on?

Have you ever heard of Derek Black? Derek is the son of the founder of a famous white nationalist website. Derek grew up inside of an ideology which blamed other groups for their own grievances. Then Derek went to college and soon discovered himself an outsider. People would poke fun at him and gossip behind his back giving them a false sense of unity—because they all thought the same way. But then a Jewish rabbi on campus noticed Derek was a loner and so he invited him to their weekly Seder meals. So every Friday for two years Derek would eat with the people he was taught were the problem. But they gave him a place where he could ask questions and where he was made to feel like he belonged. It didn't mean other students stopped making fun of him, but at least now he had people on his side, even though the people on his side didn't agree with him. The kindness of the new group changed Derek and recently, he and the rabbi were on the Daily Show. In this clip you will hear how he answers how he changed his perspective after receiving kindness from the other group.

Trevor Noah: "How do you say to yourself, now I believe the correct thing?"

Derek Black: “It is hard, and for those years when I was living in the wilderness, I spent a lot of time asking what I think about things and how many of these come from ideas I’ve never challenged...but if I’m driving by what doesn’t hurt people, by what makes life better for people, then attacking a white supremacist system that is unfair, that is unjust, and being the person in the room who challenges this is something that does this—it makes life better for people, including white people and I don’t think this is a value that could be wrong. Before I considered the only people who I needed to advocate for was this little [white supremacist] group and I realized that’s wrong. The little group has to expand and we are all a part of this. And if something hurts other people then we have to figure out a way to change that system so that we are all included. And you have to be the voice in the room doing that because it doesn’t just happen. The status quo is not going to lead us there. The only thing that undermines a white nationalist...is someone in the room challenging them, keeping it from escalating and reminding them that what they are saying is wrong.”

Trevor Noah: “Do you think that we need more white people who are actively doing that?”

Derek Black: “It’s a white person in the room who has the strongest voice to counter act a racist thought. [As a white nationalist] we were explicitly aware that when we were talking to somebody who we were trying to get them to go from, “Those immigrants” or “The South Side of Chicago is the problem” and get them to escalate to, “It’s about race.” But the person who is going to ruin that is another white person who is saying, “Stop that!” because it’s equal—they have literal skin in the game. And what they say shut any sort of racist, white nationalist thing we were saying down, and it stops the room. And that’s the thing people can do. That’s what people at college did [for me]. It’s what anyone anywhere can do is to speak up, because being silent is a choice.” [End clip]

From now on it will be more evenhanded. 3-2 or 2-3, Jesus says. And it’s inside the tension where the Holy Spirit’s influence is constantly working between us. Constantly trying to create a new unity without us relapsing back into the blame game. From now on a disciple will always be the voice in the room, standing with the scapegoat, advocating, deescalating, and challenging the system so people’s lives can be better. By the power of the Holy Spirit, may there be true peace on earth, and may it begin with me. Amen.