

The Rev. Seth Dietrich

June 25, 2023 - The 4th Sunday after Pentecost

### Families and the Sword

In the name of God: Father Son and Holy Spirit, the one Lord and Mother of us all. What do you think about this passage from Matthew's gospel? Particularly the middle part: "Do not think I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother." There was a time when it was easier for me to digest this message. A time when I easily accepted the interpretation: "Jesus' message is radical and he is all about exploding these traditional structures in society. Either get on board or go home to mommy."

But now, some of the really harsh messages from Jesus around the family make less sense to me. Maybe because I have seen how family is so often a primary place where people exercise their faith; People practicing enormous amounts of Spirit-inspired patience, gentleness, kindness, sometimes in the midst of very difficult dynamics. Being with family can be wonderful beyond measure, but it can also be a way of carrying the cross.

What do we do with this language of intentional division directed at the family? How could this passage square with the Jesus who in his last breaths makes sure that his own mother will be taken care of by one of the disciples?

Before we try to apply the truth of sacred Scripture in our lives today, we have to first honestly reckon with the cultural gap between our world and the world of the Bible. We have to honestly ask how is the Biblical world different from our world?

Family bonds in Jesus' time were so strong, so non-negotiable, that they could easily choke out all other allegiances. For example, in the famous parable of the prodigal son, when the son asks his father for his share of the inheritance, the audience in that day would have gasped in horror, for such a move in that culture was like saying, "Father, I wish you were dead, and I am going to treat you as such." In an ancient culture that could idolize family over all else, Jesus is rightly asking people to smash that idol, to place one's ultimate allegiance on God.

Also, on a practical level Jesus is building a movement that needs people who will follow him away from their families of origin to learn his new Way of Love. There is no way to stay home and watch his youtube channel. To follow Jesus you had to literally follow him. As in James and John had to put down their fishing nets and leave their father, Zebedee, bobbing in the boat. And thank God they did. But we should recognize that in some of those beloved stories of the disciples being called, swings the ugly sword of division. We can imagine Zebedee's wife, their mom, sobbing on the front porch, threatening, begging, her sons to stay; all the neighbors shuffling their feet, looking away, feeling her shame.

Fast forward 2000 years. In our day, yes, family can be an idol; it can keep one from following God. Yes, in some cases the Lord is absolutely bringing down the sword, especially a sword that

breaks the chains of abuse or neglect. Yes, families can suppress identity, demand conformity, stunt development. No one escapes without a few wounds.

But let's be serious. Does anyone really think that a primary problem in America in 2023 is that families are too close? From my limited perspective, it seems like the sword of division has already had its way with family life and the sword is still swinging. Perhaps on the Northshore, this modern-day Mayberry, we may not feel it. But we live in a weird bubble. These days there is incredible pressure on families: cultural pressure. Economic pressure. For example, good-paying stable jobs are such a key ingredient for strong families. As globalization and automation and other factors have hollowed out so many of those jobs, poor families and working class families are in crisis by almost every measure.

But even before we get to the breakdown of the family in the last 30 years, we should recognize that the nuclear family (mom, dad, 2.5 kids) this independent unit that gets held up as the American gold standard, this unit itself is a product of division. The author David Brooks wrote a long, excellent piece in *the Atlantic* a couple years ago titled: "The Nuclear Family was a Mistake." Brooks points out that for thousands of years, we humans lived in multi-generational households - grandmothers, aunts, uncles, living maybe not under the same roof, but in proximity to one another. And yes, there were problems and dysfunctions from this traditional set-up. Women were especially constrained. But our modern worship of autonomy, self-determination, freedom to be and do and go wherever we want and whenever we want severed those multi-generational, multi-relational networks.

I've certainly experienced this myself. I grew up in Austin, far away from my extended family, who were mostly in the Chicago area where my dad grew up. We would see his family about once a year. Now my family of origin is far away in Austin. But even my aunts and uncles and cousins who are still in the upper midwest, I struggle to stay in touch with them, to make time for them.

One of the most interesting points that Brooks makes is that this new arrangement of the independent nuclear family is much easier to pull off if you have money. Because with money, you can buy those things that used to be provided by the larger family network: child-care, tutoring, etalk-therapy. Money can replace these, at least partly. Of course, just because you can make it work, doesn't mean you will thrive. Loneliness in our culture is devastating, and a large part of modern loneliness is the breakdown of family relationships.

So in our modern setting, we may not really need Jesus' sword of division to break the bonds of families because we have brought that sword down upon ourselves. But we do need, maybe now more than ever, what Jesus is offering to a society with fractured families. Jesus is offering a new kind of family that extends beyond blood kinship. Jesus is opening up paths of loyalty, paths of affection, paths of care-taking larger than one's own family. This is what a local church is supposed to be.

Maybe you need this kind of relationship with a church, maybe you don't. Maybe your networks of family and friends are large enough, strong enough, that you don't need to think of church as a kind of family. This is totally OK. I have found in places where there is a lot more transience, people moving in and out more frequently, like Washington D.C., or places that are really growing with lots

of new people, like Austin, or communities with many people who've come from overseas (perhaps like the Ukrainian Orthodox Church here in MKE) a local church is more likely to feel like a necessary alternative to family. But even here, no matter if you have your whole extended family right down the block or you are on your own newly moved, the church is here, ready to be a kind of family. There are a hundred aunts and uncles, a hundred cousins, a hundred grandparents, an enormous reservoir of emotional, spiritual, and even material support, here at the ready, if and when you or your nuclear family needs it.

I close by offering some questions for reflection.

1) In an age that is swinging the sword against thick, multi-generational family life, do you feel a desire to push back? If you do want to build thicker bonds, what are a couple concrete things you might do to build up your own multi-generational family?

2) In an age of unprecedented loneliness and division, do you think of the church as a kind of center of kinship. As you take a deep breath and re-group this summer, are some concrete actions that you want to take to build up this strange, loose family.

Every small act is woven together, not just to build an organization or strengthen an institution, but to strengthen a new kind of kinship, one which the world so desperately needs.