

20 Sunday Ordinary Time

My Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Often we think about Christ as one who brings peace to individual lives and unity to human relationships. Many troubled spirits have found peace through faith in him and many broken relationships have been healed by his presence. These are truths to which some here could testify and for which all can be glad.

But there is another side to the story. Christ's impact on human life can be and often is deeply disturbing. We misunderstand both Christ and his message if we see him as one who walks through the world calming troubled waters.

Today's gospel reading contradicts that concept. He said to his disciples, "Do you think that I have come to establish peace on the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division. From now on a household of five will be divided, three against two and two against three; a father will be divided against his son and a son against his father, a mother against her daughter and a daughter against her mother, a mother – in – law against her daughter – in – law and a daughter – in – law against her mother – in – law."

Here is an aspect of the ministry of Christ that we seldom consider, and yet how true it is. The principles for which he stood and by which he lived deeply disturb the Jewish nation, divided friends and families, and led him to the cross. If his religious faith got him into that kind of

trouble, why should we expect that same faith to be an unending source of peace and harmony in our experience?

Read the gospel and you will see that Christ seldom if ever touched the life of any person without bringing disturbance, disruption, and change. Zacchaeus was a tax – collector in Jericho, one of the most prosperous men in town. He was content with his ill – gotten wealth, until he met Jesus. Things began to change. He could no longer live in comfort while others lived in want. Half of everything he owned would go to the poor. He would search out the people he had cheated and repay them with interest. One encounter with Jesus brings that much of disruption to the life of Zacchaeus.

But there were many others. John, in his gospel, tells the story of a woman from Samaria. She had been married five times. Finally, she had given up on marriage and decided to just live with a man, and then she met Jesus. One day they had brief conversation; and after that, nothing could be the same. Forgetting her water jar, she ran excitedly back to town to tell the people she had found the Messiah. But far from being a peaceful figure, he had searched the very depths of her soul.

Jesus never got a grip on any person without disturbing, disrupting, and changing that person's life. This truth needs to take hold of some of us today. Whenever Christianity becomes sweet and soothing and nothing else, it has drifted a long way from Christ himself. For he was

and is the most disturbing and demanding figure that ever walked across the stage of human experience.

I try to imagine him walking among these pews and standing at this pulpit today. I have little doubt that to some deeply troubled, he would whisper “peace.” But to many of us he would say, “Do you think that I have come to establish peace on the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division.”

This world being what it is, and the basic principles of Christ being what they are, it has to be that way. We fool ourselves if we think that society in last 2000 years has fallen in step with the ideas and ideals of Jesus. Go to most of the major corporations and try to convince the board of directors that people are more important than profits. How far do you think you would get? Go to congress and argue that housing, jobs or education should take precedence over tanks, guns, and war – ships. How far do you think you would get?

They are places in our society where that kind of stand would not make us many friends. It is not easy to live a truly Christian life in our world. Try it, and you may find yourself divided from some people who you had previously thought as of friends. The value truth above tradition, the will of God above the will of man, and people above money has never been a popular way to live and still is not. In this kind of world, if you and I truly stand for Christ and his principles, divisions and conflicts are predictable.

My Dear Brothers and Sisters,

This is not our favorite part of the gospel message. We much prefer Jesus words of peace and reconciliation. But the same one who said, “Do not let your hearts be troubled,” also said, “I have come to set the earth on fire.” If we would walk with Jesus, part of our journey will be through the fire. He is the disturbing Christ. Our world needs that, and so do you and I. **Amen.**