

20th Sun of Ord (Lk 12: 49-23)

14 August 2020

Pride: We have just heard Jesus proclaim, “I have come to set the earth on fire.” “Do you think that I have come to establish peace on earth? No I tell you, but rather division.” Not exactly what we’d expect from the Lamb of God and Prince of Peace. However, if division is a measure of the Lord’s presence among us, then Jesus is certainly thriving today. It is important for us to realize that in his declaration, Jesus is not speaking about the purpose of his incarnation, but rather, about the repercussions of his earthly existence. Namely: controversy, debate and division –Again, these are NOT the goals of Jesus' ministry but they were certainly the consequence then and those same consequences continue today.

Turmoil and division are not new. In today’s first reading, Jeremiah describes the conflict in Babylon some 600 years prior to Jesus’ birth. And we know that from the very beginning of Jesus’ ministry, households were divided. Families split on his teachings and his identity. Was he a prophet or the promised Messiah, a magician or miracle worker? Even after his resurrection, Peter and Paul frequently debated the future path of Jesus’ followers, particularly with regard to the gentile converts. In fact, the first ten centuries of what would become known as the Catholic Church were marked by ecumenical councils held to resolve conflicts between competing beliefs and it didn’t end there. The year 1054 marked the great schism within our church with regard to the role of the papacy. In 1517 the Protestant Reformation led to the creation of 1000’s of different religions. Each one interpreting Jesus’ teachings in at least one unique way. In our lifetimes, the outcomes of Vatican II continue to be hot-button issues of debate for many. And seemingly any given news headline can be fertile ground for conflict and altercation.

However, disagreement do not have to result in division. Tension may be inevitable but separation need not be. I think this is particularly true within our communities and the family relationships described in our gospel passage. I believe that we can avoid division if we can resist our emotional need for a victor in our disputes. Whenever one of us must be right, consequently one of us must be wrong and division is much more likely to result.

If you’ve been around me long enough, you’ve undoubtedly heard me profess the following mantra: “I am frequently wrong but seldom uncertain.” OK, I might be wrong, but I seriously doubt it. Admittedly, sometimes, I am far too certain in my points of view. (please don't tell my wife I just admitted that). Seriously, my confidence in my point of view can be unreasonable. On those

occasions when I am unsuccessful in swaying my opponent's point of view, I typically reach for my phone in search of validation or proof of my wisdom. If I'm honest, I'm probably less interested in finding the correct answer than I am in proving I was right. You see, I don't just want to be correct. I want to win the debate.

I grew up in a very competitive household. My father was fond of saying: "if it doesn't matter then don't keep score. But if you're going to keep score then apparently the outcome does matter and you should try to win." In my house, we all tried to win – all the time. Still today, that competitive intensity can sometimes lead to bruised feelings, but thankfully, it has not led to division. We know that we can compete with one another without division being the final outcome. In fact, many competitors are great friends possessing nothing but respect and admiration for one another. However, if we allow our personal pride to creep into the debate, a negative outcome is much more likely to occur.

One of the so-called deadly sins, pride, is said by some to be the most dangerous. Pride is not inherently bad. After all, we are encouraged to pursue activities that we can be proud of. To take pride in our accomplishments and those of our children. For that matter, pride is typically a component of positive self esteem. However, left unchecked, pride can easily warp into arrogance, self-centeredness and contempt for others. Pride can manifest itself on those occasions when our confidence in our own judgment and ability cause us to belittle those fools who are too ignorant to agree with our wisdom. When pride reaches these extremes, when we are unable to accept that we may be wrong, when we insist on winning, then division and disdain are much more likely to occur.

I would argue that at least one of the barriers to the Pharisees accepting Jesus was the pride that they held in their traditional beliefs. Similarly, I believe that at least some of the division in our individual lives is the result of the pride that we place in our individual intellect. On those occasions, I encourage us to recall Proverb 3, verses 5 and 6: "Trust in Lord with all your heart, on your own intelligence rely not. In all your ways be mindful of him and he will make straight your paths." Jesus himself, has assured us that he is the way, the truth and the life and the only path to the Father. His way, his truth, his path is love. A love so great, that no trial or tribulation can divide us. If we share that same love of Christ with our families, with our friends, and even with our adversaries; and if we can relinquish our need to win and our insistence on being right, then we will experience less conflict and less division in our lives and our world will be more as God intended.