

“A Sword to a Peace Rally?”  
Luke 12:49-56

Last week I received from my brother-in-law one of those forward type e-mails. I normally don't read a lot of those but the subject line intrigued me. It said: “How to Start a Fight.” It was a series of funny situations where someone (mostly a man) provokes another person (mostly his wife or in-laws) to start a fight. Here is one of those scenarios. “When our lawn mower broke and wouldn't run, my wife kept hinting to me that I should get it fixed. But, somehow I always had something else to take care of first, the shed, the boat, making beer.. Always something more important to me. Finally she thought of a clever way to make her point. When I arrived home one day, I found her seated in the tall grass, busily snipping away with a tiny pair of sewing scissors. I watched silently for a short time and then went into the house. I was gone only a minute, and when I came out again I handed her a toothbrush. I said, "When you finish cutting the grass, you might as well sweep the driveway."And then the fight started...

This is the way we can look at Jesus' words as found in Luke 12 about bringing division into the world. It seems that Jesus is not only responding to conflict, he is actually intentionally creating it. In Matthew 10:34 the words of Jesus are even harsher, “I come not to bring peace, but to bring a sword.” This is certainly a puzzling passage. How could Jesus the prince of peace be saying something so aggressive and violent? Jesus who is always described as meek and mild does not sound very sweet in this passage. Some prefer to use these words to justify war and violence in the name of Jesus. Often times in debates over peace and war you hear Christians using and misusing this passage to support their own views about war and peace. Others prefer to gloss over this passage or explain it away saying that Jesus didn't really mean it and that he would never bring divisions to the world.

I invite us today to consider this passage seriously because its implications are crucial to our world and our lives. The division which Jesus was talking about was not about violence. It is the division that comes from following the priorities of the kingdom of God. The division and conflict which Jesus brings do not come because Jesus is an instigator of violence or disagreements. The division comes when those who follow Jesus adopt the values of the kingdom of God which stand in opposition to the values of power and control. The values of the kingdom are about creating communities of peace, justice and compassion, while most of our human communities are motivated by greed, power and control. The context for the ministry of Jesus is essential for our understanding of his teachings. Jesus was mainly speaking to the oppressed peasants of his time. The backdrop of his ministry was first century Palestine where the Roman Empire occupied and controlled the people. At that time there were at least three known responses to the occupation and rule of Rome. First, there were those who tried to get as close as possible to the powers by cooperating with the Roman Empire. These were mostly the elite and the religious leaders who benefited from the abusive power of the Empire. Second, there were those who resisted the occupation through violence. These were the zealots of Jesus' time. They were the ones who believed that the Messiah would be a military leader like David who would defeat the Romans. The third response was that of defeat and hopelessness. This was the response of the majority of the people. They believed they were helpless in defeating the mighty and oppressive power of Rome. They lived in fear of what might happen to them if they tried to resist, and so they lived in submission to the powers of the temple and the government. Jesus came offering an alternative to these ways of life and thinking. Jesus offered a new worldview that he called, the kingdom of God. This was not completely new to the people of Israel. They had forgotten their way of life as the community of God's covenant of peace and justice. Jesus reminded them of that way of life that adhered only to the power of God, a power that brings love and peace to the earth. Howard Thurman puts it this way in his book, *Jesus and*

*the Disinherited*, “[Jesus] recognized with authentic realism that anyone who permits another to determine the quality of his[her] inner life gives into the hands of the other the keys to [their] destiny... The basic fact is that Christianity as it was born in the mind of this Jewish teacher and thinker appears as a technique of survival for the oppressed.”

So, with this context we can understand the teaching of Jesus about division being not as an act of aggression against those who were oppressing the people, but an invitation to rise above the duality of winning and losing against the system. It is a call to challenge the systems of domination in the world but not with the power of the sword or money. It is a call to transform the heart of these systems by abandoning fear and embracing love. That is why Jesus was hated by those in power. They were afraid that if he convinced the people of this way of love, justice and peace, then their power would become meaningless and they would lose control. What if people really truly believed the teachings of Jesus? The whole world, as they knew it, would be turned on its ear. Jesus was in a way a revolutionary leader, but his revolution was that of peace and love. That was just as threatening to those in power as they knew that he was winning and transforming hearts and minds.

Our world needs Jesus today, just the same way the world needed him in first century Palestine. We need his vision and his challenge to live lives that are inspired by love, trust, care, justice and compassion. But this invitation is risky. This vision is divisive because it is so different from our normal way of thinking. Risk and conflict often accompany those who take the call of Christ seriously because following Jesus is not only about becoming more holy or moral. Following Jesus is about changing the whole value system of the world starting with our own worlds. Yet, risk and conflict are things we often try to avoid. We would prefer to have an image of Jesus who can keep us safe and sound. Conflict and risk are things we are taught as children to avoid at all costs because they may lead us down a difficult path. But conflict and risk are often key to transformation. Think about the times when you have grown the most in your life. These times often come when we risk to move out of our comfort zones. Sometimes in life we are even pushed out of our comfort zones. Think about the times in our history when things changed dramatically. It is those times when people dared to step outside of the comfortable social zones of history. There is a bumper sticker that I like and it says, “Well behaved women rarely make history.” I think this bumper sticker is true of us as well. “Well behaved Christians rarely change history.” William Sloane Coffin once said, “Had Jesus heeded his parents and the religious authorities of his day, instead of saving the world he would have become the best carpenter in Nazareth. Were our children to heed us and the religious authorities of our day, they’d all become nicely packaged citizens--safe, polite and obedient.”

I am not advocating chaos or improper personal behavior as the way to follow Christ. What I am inviting us to look at is the example of Jesus and how he calls us today to risks that transform and heal the systems of domination in our world today. We must remember as we do that is that personal safety or success may be put on the line for the sake of building up the kingdom of God. This is true of our personal lives, church life, and community life. Risk-taking is at the heart of the gospel. Doing things decently and in order may appeal to our sense of order and control, but that is not how the Spirit works.

In 2005 a movie by the title “Sophie Scholl: The Final Days” was released. This movie highlights the life of a German woman during the time of Nazi Germany. “In 1943, many Germans are reeling from the terrible defeat at Stalingrad where 330,000 soldiers had been killed. Twenty-one-year-old Sophie Scholl and her brother Hans, university students, are members of the underground White Rose resistance group. Along with several other members, they have printed a leaflet declaring the war unwinnable and urging the people to reject Hitler and seek

peace. Hans is convinced that once the students at Munich University learn the truth about what is happening on the Eastern front, they will rise up against the Nazis. Sophie and Hans distribute the leaflets in the corridors. But they are spotted by a janitor and apprehended by the authorities. At Gestapo headquarters, Sophie is questioned by an experienced interrogator, Robert Mohr, about what she was doing at the university. Trying to protect other members of the White Rose, she declares that she and her brother are apolitical, lying so effectively that Mohr is prepared to let her go. But after evidence of their activities is found in the Scholls' apartment and Sophie is shown her brother's signed confession, she admits that she distributed the leaflets. Sophie is bold in her criticism of Hitler's persecution of the Jews and the Third Reich's curtailment of the people's freedoms. When he spouts the party line, she replies firmly, 'You have the wrong worldview, not me.' We witness Sophie's Protestant faith as she stammers out prayers to God and meets with a chaplain after the trial. As a follower of Christ Sophie refused to let slogans and blind nationalism cloud her vision or compromise her moral integrity. She knew that supporting the government, even through passive inaction, made her complicit in a great sin. Persecution, torture, destruction and death were the fruits of Hitler's regime—no matter what lofty words and patriotic images these acts were wrapped in. For Sophie, the choice was not easy, but it was clear. Her Christian duty was to oppose the war and even take the risk of losing her own life."

Jesus said, "I have come to bring fire to the earth." Do we take these words seriously? Are we always ready for the risk of following Christ into the living of the values of the kingdom of God? Are we ready to go where Jesus leads us? Amen.