

The Sharper Edge

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Texts: Luke 12: 49-56

So, I made a showstopper of a summer salad for dinner on Friday. Heirloom tomatoes, fresh figs, gorgonzola, thyme leaves, pine nuts, balsamic. Delish! What's more, I found as much delight in washing and slicing those gorgeous heirlooms as I did in eating them. True story. I'm relatively new to the joys of cooking, but I love it so far (and so does my family). There's something irresistibly satisfying about the feel of a sharp knife gliding through and dividing up all that juicy red, green, and yellow flesh. That said, I'm surprised I haven't cut myself more, especially since we tend to keep our knives very sharp! With my rookie knife skills, I've been chopping onions, mincing garlic, filleting fish, deboning chicken, you name it, and yet I've barely needed a band-aid. Then again, as any cook knows, dull knives are always more dangerous than sharp ones. It's a cardinal rule of any good kitchen - the sharper, the safer! It's totally counterintuitive but think about it: when you use a dull knife, you need to use more pressure, which increases your risk of losing your grip, of the knife slipping and going who knows where!

I was thinking about all of this when trying to make sense of Jesus's particularly sharp and cutting words in our passage for today and also about some of the social and political divisions we are seeing in our country right now. I can't help but wonder if there's some invitation herein for us to reconsider how some of those divisions are being cut and cleaved and also if there are ways we can sharpen the edges of our own work and witness, as people of faith and as a church community, if only to be more effective and maybe even less dull!

Let's start with our text in Chapter 12! Jesus's disciples have had almost half the gospel to see him in action, to learn from his teaching and leadership. Our good rabbi is usually cool as a summer cucumber, but here he's coming in hot. There's an almost biting edge to his words we don't often see. 'I've come to bring fire to the earth,' he says! 'I've come to bring not peace but division.' He's almost unrecognizable! Is this really the 'Prince of Peace?' The one who earlier blesses the peacemakers or later says to his disciples, 'my peace, I give to you?' Here he comes across as aggressive, impatient, and downright stressed. 'What constraint am I under,' he wages. And it gets even worse. You heard him. He says, 'I've come to set father against son, son against father, mother against daughter,' and so on. Sure, go ahead, challenge the status quo, ok, you're Jesus, we'll allow it, but disrupt and take on the most basic and precious of familial relationships, seemingly promote the separation of parent and child? This is *not* a good look for him or anyone. We might wonder... has *he* lost *his* grip? Is he pushing too hard here? Whatever best intentions, are his words, like a dull kitchen knife, slipping out of his control and doing more harm than good? Maybe. Maybe.

Or... or...is he in some deeper zone of ministry and purpose here?! Is he moving through his business, passionately and deliberately, albeit gruffly? Maybe we need to imagine him as a master chef, working sharply, swiftly, slicing, dicing, sieving, and separating. He's mixing up every social more there is, so he can serve up some best-meal-ever greater good that we can't yet taste, see or even imagine. In case you can't tell, I think it's the latter! I think he's in the zone here. I think this is a next-level moment for him. He's so immersed, so passionate about overturning the status quo of our hierarchical, power-over, social structures, including family our relationships, that he kind of loses himself for a moment in what I think

is more description than prescription. I think his language here about bringing division and not peace describes what can happen, *at least at first*, when we let him in, when we slow down enough to encounter the burning fire of God's truth in our lives. It can create extreme discomfort and havoc for a time, albeit on the way to a much deeper sense of divine peace!

To make the point, he goes right for the heart – right to those nearest and dearest of human connections between a parent and child – and he says yes, even there, especially there, we must take care and be honest about all those underlying tensions and power dynamics that creep in and go unspoken! He knows what we too often overlook. When it comes to caring for our own we are especially liable to make mistakes and excuses about how we hold onto, cede or share our power, and about how we wield or yield our privilege, our connections, our money, our inheritance, all of which are questions that at some level, eventually, relate to God's justice for all her people. He knows these are the relationships that we are most protective of, however unconsciously! Yet he seems to be saying that if we want to keep walking with him, we need to liberate and differentiate ourselves, even from our family roles, and every set role and responsibility we think we have, so we can let an even deeper truth of God's love burn within us until something new emerges. Maybe it's a newer and deeper identity as a beloved children of God, where our life and dignity are held secure by grace, come what may! Maybe it's a new kind of family, where a neighbor's child is like our own! Maybe its new ways of treating each other, where strangers are siblings, where every voice, every person of every age, race, ability, gender and socio-economic background are honored and included and accorded truly equal justice and respect! It's still shocking to see Jesus talking this way, acting like sort of a jerk it seems, but if we look more closely at what he's really saying, it shouldn't be too surprising. When he says I bring division not peace, he knows his challenge to the status quo will engender fierce resistance in the powers that be within and all around us! And it's all on way to that deeper, divine even delight filled peace.

Over the last two weeks, almost 20 of us have been joining together online for conversation about Bill McKibben's latest: "The Flag, the Cross and the Station Wagon: A Graying American Looks Back at His Suburban Boyhood and Wonders What the Hell Happened." Bill is a writer, activist, longtime environmentalist and a friend who we've had speak here before. The book is part memoir and part commentary on changing expressions of American patriotism, politics and religion over the last 40 to 50 years. He shares stories about growing up in nearby Lexington, guiding tours as a teenager on the Lexington Battlegreen, going to youth group meetings in the 70's at the big Protestant church in town, Hancock United Church of Christ (where I would later serve before coming here). Through it all, he sketches a picture of a stubborn, distinctly suburban status quo, yet he also traces threads of sharp-edged resistance through it all. The book has resonated deeply with those close to Bill in age or who grew up in similar towns. He talks a lot about churches like ours, with curiosity and generosity, as he tries to understand our strange breed, that is mainline, mostly white, liberal, one-time Protestant establishment churches, who are somehow still hanging on, albeit with smaller numbers, and given a decades-long surge of evangelicals at one end of a spectrum and a rapid increase in so-called Nones, n.o.n.e.s, or those with no religious affiliation or participation, on the other. He's clear-eyed in addressing the large "C" church's historic and ongoing roles in legacies of white supremacy and colonialism. But he also honors congregations' roles in building progressive social movements, offering spiritual sustenance, and nurturing community and civic engagement. He believes that the church is at its best when it serves as a counterculture, yet his story laments the fact that so much of what counts for church these days is inseparable from the dominant culture itself. And, for our purposes today, Bill helpfully and rightfully notes: "When an institution gets very big, it's radical edge is very far from its center. And for Christianity that radical edge is actually the heart—or should be." How 'bout an Amen? The large "C"

church has no doubt grown way too big over the centuries, with too much appetite for land, progress, people, power. It's all but lost a sense of rootedness in that radical edge of Jesus that would disrupt the status quo at all costs. And yet, gratefully, Bill doesn't give up on us entirely. He says: "it's worth imagining ... what a nimbler small-c church might look like. Whether, to stretch the analogy, there's a possibility of a (nonviolent) [revolutionary] Minuteman-like Christianity arising, one that's more flexible, more rooted, and more dangerous in the best sense of the word. A Christianity that might—in the new justice moment, the opening that appeared after the murder of George Floyd and as the planet overheats—play a useful role. Not a decisive role, but a useful role."

So yes, let's imagine that! In fact, better yet, let's take a page from today's gospel and Bill's book, and let's be that church! We can start by wondering together what it would mean for First Church to be more nimble and flexible, yet also more rooted, and especially more dangerous in our work and witness, and I would add more humble, too? How can we hone and sharpen our countercultural edges, to be more effective, or as Bill says, more 'useful'? What new divisions might we need to provoke in our lives and families?

It may help to return to the example of Lexington once more. Bill writes: "if one wanted to indict places like Lexington in those years, it's easy: they were fine with the concept of civil rights and inclusion and being a good neighbor as long as it required no actual sacrifice ... There was a "Welcome" sign at the inn, but "No Vacancy" flashed as well!" Here he's speaking mostly about Lexington's repeatedly failed attempts to build affordable housing! Lexingtonians knew that a vote for affordable housing and more diverse community would mean diminished property value, and they couldn't do it, despite their progressive values! No matter their support of Civil Rights and equality in theory, they couldn't vote against their own economic self-interest even when they knew it was for the common good. This pattern, among others, has played out in recent decades across the country, and has led to skyrocketing accumulation of wealth for mostly white families who live in such towns. It's why the Globe reported in 2018 that the average white family has \$237,000 of net assets and the average black family has \$8. Yes \$8. What the hell happened? For one thing, progressive families, like many of ours, couldn't stop accumulating! It's more complicated than that, to be sure, but these dynamics are surely part of it!

I bring this up because it makes clear at least one radical thing or question that will be required if we are to hone and sharpen our radical edges such that we and others can enjoy a taste of that divine truth, justice, joy and peace. Perhaps it's the most radical question of all: just what are we willing to give up? What are we willing to sacrifice so that we and others can have a real taste of God's justice and joy? What are the radical or even incrementally radical changes that we can make?

And here's exactly where we should be extra careful, lest we be like a dull kitchen knife! We don't want to do it out of a dull analysis! We don't want to do it under the pressure or burden of white guilt, or out the urgency to "do something" or chances are we will lose our grip, and we will end up causing more harm than good! But, if we can get in that zone together with Jesus, if we can discern together, how to pare down, need less, be more nimble, more rooted, more dangerous in our individual lives, and collectively, I believe we too can prepare for that taste of God's own delight!

I know in part because I've seen it here already, oddly enough, at times when meals are being prepped, whether for a big after church celebration, or for the shelter or the Friday Cafe, when I can rarely tell who the volunteers are and who are guests because there's a community vibe of mutual respect that's

so palpable with people literally sharing the jackets off the backs with each other! There's something about family-style eating that brings these status quo upending dynamics alive and Jesus surely knew it! I wonder what other personal, household and social mores do we need to slice and dice and recreate for this age? What new political measures for the common good do we need to get out the vote for? What accounts or inheritances or recently much improved real estate assets should we be working to redistribute through a more just lens? For now, for today, take a moment and consider: what's one small and specific area where you can bring a more radical, truth and justice-seeking edge to your spiritual life, your relationships, your lives of love and service?

As we prepare to regather this fall, I hope we can share our answers and continue to ask some of these hard questions together. For anyone interested in what is still for some a radical idea (though I hope it is becoming increasingly mainstream), I invite you to join us next Sunday after church for a conversation about reparations and how are we are learning to practice reparations both as a community and in our individual lives as well. And of course, there are many other ways to live out this call to be countercultural! Again, consider what is one small step you can take to sharpen the radical edge of your witness.

Siblings, our democracy is a mess right now, as divided as ever! And yet here we have Jesus calling for even more division! Perhaps our current tensions are evidence that's God's truth and justice are yet emerging, poking, prodding and provoking the powers that be! Let's not shy away from those divisions! Let's learn together how where and we can work together to let that "yet more light and truth" we sang about break forth even now! Amen.

