

Any of us here this morning can tell a story or more about when we were rejected or experienced division in our own family.

Growing up, our friends next door had a dad who was an alcoholic... His family staged an intervention. Their dad left the family.

Last week at Lectionary Lectio, someone told me about going to a Roman Catholic parish as a child with a friend. When her family learned of it, one of them said, "If you worship there you don't need to bother to come home."

I know a young woman who decided to become a nun. When she told her mother about it, her mother pretended she was dead.

Whenever we experience rejection, the Gospels teach us that Jesus is with us to give us peace. Luke, especially, lets us know right from the beginning who this Jesus is and why he has come.

*"And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High;
for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, ...to give light to those who sit
in darkness and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the way of peace.'*

"And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising
God and saying,
'Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace among those whom he favours!'*

*"The woman Jesus had healed from a hemorrhage came trembling; and falling
down before him, she declared in the presence of all the people why she had
touched him, and how she had been immediately healed.⁴⁸ He said to her,
'Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace.'*

*"The disciples who had met Jesus on the road to Emmaus told the others what had
happened on the road, and how Jesus had been made known to them in the
breaking of the bread. While they were talking about this, Jesus himself stood
among them and said to them, 'Peace be with you.'"*

So how come this is what we hear this morning:

“Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division! From now on five in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three; they will be divided”

What is Jesus doing?

Eugene Peterson paraphrases what Jesus is saying with this: *Do you think I came to smooth things over and make everything nice? Not so. I've come to disrupt and confront!*

Not only that, but Jesus has some steam on. He says he wants to bring fire to the earth.

Could it be that Jesus is preparing both his disciples and us for a life of choosing to stick by Jesus and to follow him wherever he leads? Because whenever we choose to follow the leading of the Spirit of the Risen Jesus, we are necessarily NOT choosing anything else. We are necessarily NOT choosing to make the status quo our gospel. We are choosing NOT to be silent in the face of injustice. We are choosing NOT to shut our eyes to other people's suffering. Whenever anyone chooses to follow Jesus, things are going to get interesting, at the very least. When we choose turn first to Jesus and embrace his love, it helps us to see everything that is not love, not just, not compassionate, and to do something about it.

A little earlier in Luke, Jesus has just told his disciples not to be afraid of those who can kill the body. Clearly, he is preparing them to face hardship and opposition in their lives of discipleship. He is preparing them so they can remember that whenever they are being persecuted and rejected, that a far worse fate would be to lose their center, get off course, and forget what gives meaning to their lives. Much better to face what lies ahead with eyes wide-open. Much better to call on the inner strength of love than to allow oneself to be caught up in the strife of pettier things.

Jesus is fortifying his disciples and us with the for-knowledge that not everybody will be thrilled with the message of the Gospel. People do not like to be confronted with the truth when it doesn't suit their purposes. There is going to be push-back.

When someone lies, cheats and steals for a living, and someone else comes along and says, “Hey! Wait a minute, you can’t do that”, the liar isn’t going to be pleased. He will try to find a way to persevere in getting what he wants by whatever means necessary, even if that means crushing those who get in his way.

So, Jesus wants to help us and the disciples to hold firm in love when we face opposition and not to make compromises. This is the fire. With Jesus, we are empowered not to take anything less than the path of love and compassion. Even if it means we have to rearrange our schedule to go out of our way to redress injustice, then that is what we have to do.

Jesus’ fire is contagious if we let it take hold. We can be fired-up, on fire, or have fire in our belly. We can even light a fire under someone. This is not the destructive fire of fire and brimstone, but the fire of inspiration—the fire of the Holy Spirit—the fire of what drives us to do what we do. It is the fire that can set us on an unexpected path of surprise and discovery, of new life and growth.

Imagine that the fire put crazy ideas into our heads—ideas about how we could reach out to others and teach them about God—ideas about how to share the fire with those who are outside the parish, outside our age-group, outside our political persuasion, and outside our comfort zone? What would that be like? What kind of opposition or rejection would we have to be prepared to face?

You see, when Jesus says he has come to bring division, it’s not because division is his goal. His goal has always been and always will be peace and love. But, Jesus knows that when you bring genuine love and compassion into a society where selfishness and ruthlessness are also at work, a confrontation is necessarily going to ensue. People are going to take sides. There is going to be disagreement and division.

Ultimately, Jesus is telling us that we're not supposed to worry about it when things get ugly, or let that distract us. We are not supposed to get flapped by it. Instead, Jesus wants us to stick close by him and to breathe deeply from the Spirit of love and peace that God is pouring into our hearts at all times. When we remember to breathe the breath of God, or when we let God light a fire in us, we will be empowered to love those who hurt us, reject us, and disagree with us. We will be empowered to hold firm to whatever we have discerned is the path of righteousness and love and to not give up.