

“Long Division”

Thirty-seven years ago this summer my best friend moved from Chapel Hill, North Carolina, to New Haven, Connecticut. We had been friends for less than a year, but it was a rich year for me. While we were coworkers it was outside of work that so much happened. He introduced me to the writing of Walker Percy. He taught me how to brew beer. He and another friend “kidnapped” from my bed in the midst of a snowstorm on my birthday. I was going to miss him.

It was going to be difficult to keep in touch, after all this was before email, cellphones and Facebook. We had to write letters or make long distance calls that were charged by the minute. But what was most unsettling for me was that he was headed off to Yale Divinity School. He was going to study to be a minister. I thought that we would no longer be able to be friends.

At that time in my life I was not religious. I floated between agnosticism and deism. But mostly I just did not pay much attention to the spiritual or religious aspects of life. My wife was an atheist so it was easy to simply ignore religion and God. If Gary was going to become a priest how could we remain friends? He would be holy and wrapped up in the religious world while I would be continuing my life in the secular world. I was happy for him, but not happy for me.

Jesus, the Prince of Peace, almost dead center in the Gospel of Luke, says peace is not his goal but rather division. The division he is talking about is the breaking up of the status quo. To illustrate this, he talks about Judaism’s most essential social structure—the family. He says that he is lighting a fire that will break apart families, but by doing so will create new structures. No longer will blood lineage be the most important building block of society, but rather faith in God through Jesus Christ.

This statement about division is actually not new at this point in the gospel. Earlier his mother and brothers try to take him home, because they are worried he is out of his mind. He responds to their arrival by saying “My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it.”¹ Later in Luke he says, “Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple.”²

Jesus' mission is to break up the old ways that had become stuck and unfruitful. He was like the chiropractor or massage therapist who breaks apart old and unhelpful attachments to allow the body to conform to its natural way of being. Breaking the old attachments of fascia and muscle is uncomfortable; it can hurt so much it makes you cry. But once the healing begins the body finds that its original way of being feels better. We feel more like ourselves and less like we are encumbered by our history and hurts. Rather than living life braced for the next hurt and held back by old ones, we find that we move with the freedom God intended.

¹ Luke 8:19-21

² Luke 14:26 NRSV

So it is with Jesus in this pericope. He is helping us realize that the coming of the Kingdom is not going to be easy. He is telling us to get ready for it. He even wonders how we can see the signs of changes in the weather, but cannot see the signs to which he is pointing. Jesus' lessons are not always warm and comforting, they are often quite hard, and especially for those of us who are comfortable in our lives as they are.

I was comfortable in my life when my best friend went away to Divinity School. Despite my fears neither the distance nor his studies put an end to our friendship. In fact, I visited him and his wife several times while he was at Yale. On one of those visits I found myself reintroduced to God while receiving communion. As our evangelical friends would say, I had a conversion experience.

While I feared division and the end of a friendship, I found a gateway to something new; a deeper relationship with God, Father, Son and the Holy Spirit. The faith of my youth was rekindled and I started down a new path that opened up my life. I was released me from the apathetic comforts of materialism and found a life that was more than I could ask or imagine.

Over the following years I was led to lay participation and leadership in various parishes. I discovered my love for learning about and teaching the Bible. I discovered a passion for mission which led me to hollers in West Virginia, shanty towns in South Africa, orphanages in Honduras, and poor neighborhoods of the Dominica Republic. It led me on pilgrimages with youth to Italy and Ireland and the DR. It led me to ordained ministry, to this little town and parish, and to you.

Through my fear of losing a friend I was broken open. The fire of division that Jesus kindled in me through that friend changed my life. It was not an easy change by any means. It caused separation from some people and the end to some relationships, but it has been the greatest blessing I have received.

Lots of people find this passage in Luke challenging. Ministers try to avoid preaching on it. It is one of those sayings of Jesus that does not comfort or console. It is Jesus's teaching at his most difficult. It is also a great gift. It is Jesus telling us that the status quo is not permanent. He tells us that we have a way to freedom and hope. He tells us that even when we think things are darkest, that is when the light is about to shine through.

When your life is darkest keep your eyes open for signs of new life. Be ready for Jesus to kindle within you God's passionate fire. Permit the fire to burn away the dull and material bonds that hold you back. Allow the light from your fire be the light of Christ that leads you and countless others all the way home.