

## The Cutting Edge

*Jesus said, "Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword."*

With the passage of time, some of the jagged edges of the difficult teachings from our scripture have been worn smooth and dull by their familiarity. The Gospel for Sunday, however, spill out into the air with a flow of words that are still ragged and sharp to our ears. But Jesus' truthfulness is uncompromising, so as faithful Christians we are called this day to examine our relationship with our God who challenges us to move and change.

We, like the generations of disciples who came before us, are confronted with the knowledge that God desires both our fidelity and our transformation; realizing this fidelity and transformation may well require the sacrifice of intimate relationships or the reorientation of guiding precepts to which we cling. We, like the disciples, will be forced to make choices, sometimes between the things and people we hold most dear.

Jesus' disciples, like many in Matthew's community, would have recognized his words of division and strife within the family as those of the prophet Micah. Micah prophesied that on the Day of the Lord, when God would break into history, our enemies would be members of our own household. Jesus is unequivocally stating that *that* time has come. In the ministry and life of Jesus, the Kingdom is come. God's Kingdom has pierced temporal time, and now our world and the Kingdom lie side by side and choices have to be made.<sup>[1]</sup> We, like all those who came before, have to decide which world we will inhabit.

As Matthew was writing his gospel, the reality of Jesus' words was painfully clear. To follow Jesus in that time meant that there was every chance that your parents, spouse, or siblings did not. Matthew's gospel came to a community that was torn between what was and what was to be. Followers of the Way (of Jesus) were no longer strictly identified as belonging to a sect of Judaism and certainly they had no identity or parallel in the gentile world. First generation "Christians" (they were not yet called Christians) by sheer definition, had made a choice that set them apart. This choice had set them apart from everything that had heretofore meant stability and security, and thrust them into a world that had suddenly become hostile. These early followers had become strangers in their own land. They knew the power of the sword that could rend and divide.

But Jesus did not and does not desire to divide families nor does he desire us, as faithful people, to turn our backs on those we love who may not themselves share our beliefs. Jesus simply states the uncompromising truth to prepare us for the painful reality that to embrace the new, we must live through the death of the old.

We have all perhaps, in one way or another, experienced a poignant time when grief for the old and hope for the new have resided side by side in a strange symbiosis. The knowledge and truth that is found in Jesus' paradoxical promise of finding life only in dying to self are self-evident. When we *finally* want Abundant Life for others as much or more as we desire it for ourselves, it is then that we become citizens in the Kingdom of God. And once we claim our first and best

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<sup>[1]</sup> Walter Bruggemann.

loyalty to this kingdom, we are no longer governed by killing political ideologies, oppressive cultural *certainties* (that were never actually certain at all), and we are freed from our enmeshment in family systems that create dysfunction or a skewed identity.

All of us have been bound by one or all of the above loyalties that are not life-giving. What Jesus tells us in this Sunday's Gospel is meant to set us free to be whole and free to give ourselves away to something that is life-giving for all.

We are in a very unique time in our history. We are at a reckoning, a tipping point; we are on the cutting edge of claiming justice and hope for people that have been denied these things since the founding of our country. History is crying out for healing, and as people of faith we have a particular responsibility to be a healing force for change.

Yes, this startling Gospel does indeed cut like a knife and startle us with its uncompromising truth. Life in Christ cannot be lived in half-measure, and our loyalty and commitment to God must not be superseded by anyone or anything else lest we become bound and imprisoned by the false securities the world has to offer. The in breaking of the Kingdom of God requires a choice. The collision of these two worlds was once described in this way:

"The crisis of the old world is not that it is empty and meaningless, but that it is *obsolete*. The new world is God's future come into being, and it does violence to the old world, which will pass away. The old world can provide structure and meaning, but only the Kingdom brings life. The old world can provide temporary shelter, but only the life of the Kingdom leads home." Life comes with some difficult choices. "*I have come not to bring peace, but a sword.*" This sword is driven into the heart of the world and clearly marks the boundary between life and death. What is left is for us is to choose: do we choose life or do we choose death?

Grace and Peace,  
Stephanie+