



The first chapter of Luke's Gospel proclaims that Jesus will "*guide our feet into the way of peace.*" At Jesus's birth, an angelic choir sings "*Peace on earth!*" At numerous times throughout his ministry Jesus offered various people words of peace: "*Go in peace and sin no more.*" "*Peace I leave with you.*" "*My peace I give you.*" "*I have told you these things, so that in me you might have peace.*"

Prior to the pandemic, many of us regularly engaged in a practice on Sunday mornings that followed Jesus's example, "*The peace of the Lord be with you always.*" "*And also with you.*" I think it's safe to assume that most of us believe that our faith is one of peace-making and peace-keeping.

So, then what are we to make of Jesus's shocking words in today's Gospel which seem to explode off the pages with harsh, provocative language that sounds anything but peaceful? *I came to bring fire to the earth...Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division!*

*Really...did Jesus just say that he came to bring fire and division? Not peace?* Because if so, then this sounds more than just a little threatening. And I don't know about you, but I'm struggling to make sense of a teaching that claims outcomes of alienation and division, separation and conflict. Politics, nationalism, race, economic status, social standing, educational level, religious denomination, gun control, abortion, immigration, same-sex marriage. With all the divisiveness present in our world these days, it seems like the *last* thing we need is a gospel text that seemingly encourages more division. Truthfully, it's just uncomfortable to hear. And then I wonder...is that the Gospel's problem...or ours?

These Scriptures compel us to move beyond our soft and comfortable faith in order to wrestle with the hard and high costs of following Jesus. They declare in disturbingly honest terms what will happen if we dare to take our faith seriously.

But was this really the will of God in sending Jesus into the world? Is this really what was at the heart of Jesus's ministry? To makes sense of the words that Jesus speaks today in Luke's Gospel I think we need to take a closer look at the bigger picture, because I just don't think that division is the end game for God.

But I also wonder if there's grace and mercy and gift in the fire and division that Jesus brings. I imagine there is. Deep down, I wish that this wasn't so, and yet Jesus offers the simple truth today that when we stand for that which matters most, not everyone will stand with us.

What would happen in our families, our communities, our churches, and our world if we allowed the "fire" of God's Word to burn through us. The bottom line is, if "tender Jesus, meek and mild" is what we prefer, then this week's Gospel isn't for us. If feel-good faith is the comfort zone we refuse to leave, then we're missing out because the peace of God is about so much more than good feelings.

It means that as followers of Jesus we need to be clear and honest about the faith that we claim. And *if* we're being honest then the truth is we don't always appreciate the truth of the message that Jesus brings. If it doesn't fit with how we want or believe things to be, if the message is confrontational to our lifestyle or our comfort, then it's somehow not worth the effort.



Yes, there's joy in living a faithful life. There's beauty and abundance. There's the promise of love, wholeness, healing, and grace. But a life of faith is also demanding, risky, and at times it causes us to have to choose one side or the other.

Following Jesus means not merely adopting new beliefs, but a new way of living. This journey we're called to impacts our values, our choices, and our priorities. If we're honest and faithful to the leading of the Holy Spirit then we may find ourselves at odds with even those who are most dear to us.

To be a follower of the one who accepted and even honored the disgraceful means that we need to do the same, rejecting the easy temptation of judging others and instead inviting them into our lives. To be a follower of the one who preached endless and unconditional love and forgiveness is to practice the same, particularly when it comes to those who differ from us – in what they believe, in the color of their skin or language they speak, in the pronouns they claim for themselves, in the political party they represent, or the economic category they fit into.

It's important to remember that when Jesus speaks of division rather than peace in Luke's Gospel, he's being *descriptive, not prescriptive*. It's not Jesus's desire to set fathers against sons or mothers against daughters. And it's certainly not his will that we stir up conflict or use his words to justify violence or war.

But his words are a necessary reminder that the peace Jesus offers us is not the fake peace of denial or dishonesty. His is a truth-telling peace. The kind of deep, life-changing peace that doesn't hesitate to break in order to mend and cut in order to heal. Jesus will name realities we don't want named. He will upset hierarchies we'd rather keep intact. He will expose the lies that we tell ourselves out of fear, laziness, or unwillingness. And he will disrupt all dynamics of our relationships with ourselves and with each other that keep us from the wholeness God offers.

This isn't because Jesus wants us to suffer. It's because he knows that real peace is worth fighting for. And so knowing this I have to ask myself and all of us, when was the last time our faith "divided" us? When was the last time we allowed Jesus to bring us to a point of discomfort? When was the last time our faith life encouraged holy division, holy change, holy transformation, in ours or someone else's heart?

My dear friends, I now hear the hard words that Jesus offers as simply describing what can be...what's possible. What would it be like to allow Jesus to disturb us, to unmake us, and divide us? What would it be like to experience the peace that costs, the peace that breaks, the peace that saves.

Jesus will indeed "guide our feet into the way of peace." He will. But only if we let him and then choose to follow. Thanks be to God. Amen.