

WHEN THE GOING GETS TOUGH

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Camrose United Church
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If there is any time of year that seems to be made for lolling, it is the days of mid-August. Just when we are making plans for one last long weekend, shaking our heads over the vacation we didn't get enough of, envisioning a little hammock or deck time, and hoping to wring out of the summer one more precious moment of peace, the Lectionary serves up a moment of truth.

It is not as if Luke has nothing to offer on the subject of peace. The word occurs in strategically important places all through his gospel. It is promised at Jesus' birth (2:14), pronounced over the woman who bathed Jesus' feet with her tears (7:50), bestowed upon the woman with a hemorrhage (8:48), and given to the seventy to share (10:5). It occurs also in two passages that follow today's text: the word is on the lips of those who cheer Jesus' entrance into Jerusalem (19:38) and in the last few verses of the book it is the first word the resurrected Christ says to his disciples (24:36). Peace is hardly an incidental theme in the book of Luke. A sense of peace is what we look for when the going gets tough. Why then, in today's text, does Jesus say so boldly, "Oh, so you think I have come to bring peace, do you? Hardly, I have come to bring division."

Jesus is frustrated. Doesn't he say in verses 49 – 50 that he is filled with longing? He is chomping at the bit, leaning forward into the not yet, anxious to move on. He is constrained, if we take the connotation of the Greek word into account. Like Jeremiah, he has God shut up in his bones like fire (Jer. 20:9) and he is weary from trying to hold it all in. He is kicking against the restraints. Jesus is frustrated. Perhaps he is indulging in a little hyperbole here.

While it is tempting to soften the blow of Jesus' words by making excuses – it was a hot day, the crowd was being deliberately obtuse, he was hungry, the strain of the wait was getting to him – it is not likely that Luke recorded sayings he did not mean for us to take seriously. The fact is that although peace was the anthem the angels sang over Bethlehem and the song on the lips of Jerusalem, division was a result of Jesus' ministry. Ever since the moment of his coming, the world has been divided into two kinds of people: those who are honest about reading the signs and facing up to them and those who pretend that they cannot see what is as plain as the day in front of them. Apparently there were lots of the latter in the crowd that day. No wonder Jesus was frustrated. No wonder the going was tough. No wonder he called them hypocrites. That's a pretty mild word for people who refuse to admit they know who Jesus is.

Jesus creates crisis. Of course the crises Jesus created had little or nothing to do with the fact that during the few moments this text describes, he was frustrated. The kind of crisis Jesus created, he created with his coming into the world – with his person, his teaching, and his work; with his death and Resurrection. The kind of crisis Jesus created

is a moment of truth crisis. In today's text Jesus provokes a crisis in the family, and there would be few more beloved, dearer institutions for Jesus' first Century audience than the family. In Jesus, the peace of the family is being broken. The going is going to get tough.

Will Willimon who writes a resource I read, tells a story about his friend Stanley Hauerwas. Stanley begins one of his classes at Duke University by reading a letter from a parent to a government official. The parent complained that his once obedient and well-motivated son had become involved in some weird religious group. The group had completely taken over his life, forced him to forsake all of his friends, and turned him against his family. The parent was pleading with the government official to intervene and take action against this obviously disruptive group which had caused such difficulty in this person's family.

Than Hauerwas asked his class, "What is this letter about?"

The class thought it was probably concerning a kid who had gotten mixed up with the Moonies or some other controversial sect.

To their surprise, Hauerwas revealed to them that the letter was composed from a number of letters from third-century Roman parents complaining about a weird religious group called Christians.

We sometimes forget that one of the chief Roman criticisms of Christians was that Christians were anti-family, turning children against their parents and encouraging wives to be disobedient to their husbands. No institution was more beloved in imperial Rome than the family. The family determined one's social and economic destiny. There was almost nothing that classical Romans would not do for their families. The church assaulted the institution of the Roman family.

If we thumb through the Bible, looking for material on "family values" we will have a rough go of it. The Hebrew Scriptures, or Old Testament, is definitely more helpful than the Christian Scriptures or New Testament. There, family means a great deal – though virtually nothing outside the context of the people of Israel. And yet, one would be hard-pressed to find supportive material in the rather sordid accounts of family life among the patriarchs and matriarchs of Genesis, the Book of Ruth, or Song of Songs. Moving right along to the Christian Scriptures, matters get worse for the family. Here is Jesus, with almost nothing said about his family. On the few occasions, after his early childhood in Luke (the rest of the gospels appear to know absolutely nothing of Jesus' childhood and family), whenever Jesus' family enters, it is usually in a rather unflattering way. Jesus makes it quite clear that his family does not consist of his biological brothers and sister, or even his mother. Then he proceeds to go to Galilee asking people to leave their families and follow him, creating more crises and tough going when it comes to faith.

No only does Jesus appear to have no family responsibilities himself, but he makes explicit attacks upon marriage and the family. And don't quote that passage from Ephesians 5 either. After talking about the mutual duties of wives to obey their husbands and husbands to love their wives, Paul ends by saying that all of this is mainly material related to Christ and his church, not marriage in the first place!

Our human family, for all of its strengths, is not enough to make us a disciple. Therefore the church has found it helpful to take us out of our families and place us within a much more expansive experience of family, namely the church. In the church, we talk about our sisters and brothers, so the church really does believe in the family, the family of God, and the way that family is born is not through natural generation but through spiritual regeneration.

Here is a "family" that knows no social, economic, racial or political boundaries. Here is a family in which our grandparents don't live "over the river and through the woods" but rather in Jerusalem, Rome, New Delhi, Nairobi. These saints, now our parents in the faith, show us the way.

The writer of Hebrews continues to call the roll of our parents in faith, a roll that began in last week's reading, a roll of those whose faith in God is a model and encouragement. In verses 29 – 31, we see sharp contrasts between those who put their faith in God – The Israelites and Rahab; and those who do not – the Egyptians and the people of Jericho.

In verse 32, the writer calls to mind the familiar figures in Israel's history: four judges (Gideon, Barak, Samson, and Jephthah), Israel's greatest king, David and the prophet-priest Samuel. Their exploits, including several divine deliverances, are alluded to in verses 33-34. As a result of their faith, all of the people of faith named here were able to defeat enemies and overcome obstacles.

The community for which Hebrews was originally written is believed to have faced serious persecution. Concerned that people would turn away from Christian faith, the writer encourages the people to hold fast, calling on the memory of the faithful who have gone before or the "cloud of witnesses." These "spectators" cheer on the current faithful as they "run the race of faith."

Those who run are to set aside anything that holds them back or distracts them from the forward movement of their faith and I'm guessing that was what Jesus was getting at when he created the crisis in the Luke passage. Our families may not always appreciate and welcome our being part of a church family – a family that challenges that which creates broken relationship that challenges the forces of evil, a family that works toward building the household of God.

The writer's use of "we" and "us" signals that this race is not a solo run. Instead, the community of faithful journeys together, not in competition but in collaboration and encouragement.

Running a fruitful race, producing a fruitful vineyard – these are what God requires of God's people.

There are many challenges in today's passages to prod our faithfulness – what kind of race are we running and what kind of fruit are we bearing? Are we willing to create divisions in our families for the sake of our faith? But there are also words of encouragement as we are reminded of others who have gone before us and that a gracious and merciful God has sustained them. Who are those folks in our lives? Who has encouraged our faith? Can we and how do we imagine ourselves being an encouragement to others in their faith journeys when the going gets tough?

Although Jesus is the one who occasions decision, who causes division, and who creates crisis, in Luke he is also the one who knows the things that make for peace (19:41-44). In the Gospel of Luke there is an ironic strand of texts that balance the urgent and threatening images of this passage – texts that give us encouragement when the going of our faith gets tough. So if Jesus is the one who causes the fall of those who oppose God's sign, he is also the one who causes the rise of many who recognize God's plan. He is the one who gives peace to the seventy to share (10:1-2). He is the one who knows the things that make for peace (19:41-44). But, the question is whether or not we are paying attention.

Today's passage from Luke reminds us Jesus does not force peace on anyone. It is left up to us to read the signs and sometimes it does make the going get tough in the life of faith. Amen.