

A Sermon Preached by the Reverend Carole Johannsen
St. Augustine's Episcopal Church
Croton-on-Hudson, New York
The Fifth Sunday after Pentecost (Year A) – June 19, 2005

Listen carefully to today's readings from both the Old Testament and the Gospel and they appear to justify one of the most unattractive characteristics of human behavior: the propensity to separate the human race into "us" and "them." Still, it all sounds rather familiar, doesn't it? Jesus telling us that "*Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death.*" Not the reading we would have chosen for Father's day, but still, we have only to pick up The New York Times or listen to network news, or eavesdrop on the train to New York to recognize the truth of these words.

As if there isn't enough to divide us, these days, religion seems to be the world's most powerful axe, splitting apart people who once called one another kin or friend. Muslim radicals are at war with everyone, leaving faithful, moderate Muslims among their most profound victims. Christian "conservatives" and Christian "liberals" are doing battle with one another in the political realm, and God knows, Episcopalians are near coming to blows over the issue of homosexuality. Jews continue to be disparaged by *everyone*. My next-door neighbor, a quiet Seik whose faith demands that he wear a turban in public, stopped wearing his turban after 9/11 and does not make eye contact with neighbors any more. It's dangerous to be a religious person these days unless you are mainstream, keep your ideas to yourself, and go public only on the Sabbath.

But unfortunately for us, that is *exactly* what Jesus is telling his disciples *not* to do in today's portion of the gospel. Safety and moderation is *not* what he wants from us! He wants us to go against the culture, to stand up and be counted, to be obvious about our religion every day in every way. Easy for him. Difficult for us.

Of course, God had required that of faithful followers long before the birth of Jesus. Listen to the whining of old Jeremiah: one of the most faithful of prophets, even if he was a constant complainer. "*O LORD! You have enticed me ... you have overpowered me. Now I'm a laughingstock in the neighborhood. I have no choice but to point to violence and cry out against it. I try – God knows I try – to turn my back on you and your word. I promise myself I will not mention God. I will not speak in God's name. But then I burn up inside and I cannot hold it in. Even my close friends have turned against me.*"

Easy for Jeremiah. Difficult for us. How many of us would risk alienating our friends, jeopardizing our place in the community, for the sake of our religion? And yet, that is exactly what Jesus seems to be asking of us here. He is making it clear that there are but two kinds of people in the world: those who listen and *hear* the word of God, and then follow it in their lives. And those who don't.

In the work of ministry, so much of what we do has to do with conflict. In the parish, *any* parish, there are almost always disagreements; and in the work I do now, as a Hospice chaplain, a lot of effort goes into helping families reconcile long-held differences among themselves before one of their members dies. It is so *easy* to lapse into us/them situations; find someone who agrees with you and you will just as quickly identify those who disagree with you new-found, albeit small, group. How do we escape from such divisiveness that takes so much of our energy. And what on earth do we do when Jesus himself tells us to expect such human divisions because of our relationship with God?

A few years ago I traveled to Orkney, the islands off the northern coast of Scotland, just below Shetland and not far below the Arctic Circle. It is an enchanting place: the light is pale and the color of the land, sea and sky are mellow and satisfying. There are more birds of more kinds than I've ever seen in the wild and because of the constant wind, there are no bugs.

But most compelling for me were the people. Every island of the dozen or so that are inhabited must struggle to make its own economy work and cooperation is essential. There is only so much work, and it must be shared so that everyone in the community can earn of living. They don't hesitate to assist one another in need even when they don't particularly like one another. It's a matter of survival. Medical care and education of children is a mutual priority.

Most impressive of all is that they *acknowledge* one another. I noted that everyone greets everyone else, whether they're walking or driving. I took a walk one evening about 11 pm, just before what passes for sundown that far north, on the main street of the town of Pierowall on the northernmost island of Westry. Every driver who passed me, greeted me: from teenage boys lifting a cool finger off the steering wheel, to adults holding up a palm, and one woman waving enthusiastically and smiling as if I were just the person she was looking for. By the time I'd walked a mile away and back to the hotel, this Connecticut Yankee cum New Yorker was waving back, and smiling.

Paradise, I thought. Camelot. This is the way it *should* be.

But I bought a book written by an English journalist who, with his wife, had decided to settle on Papa Westry, one island over from the one I'd deemed idyllic. From his book I learned about the underbelly of Camelot: the age-old feuds, the arguments, the names given to "them" – be "outlanders" or "inmovers" or "tourists" or brothers who had taken the other side in an argument. So much for Camelot.

But interestingly, the people of Orkney tend to be more ardent church-goers than the rest of Scotland. Churches are the centers of their small towns. It's a matter again of *listening* and *doing*. Or not.

Are we doomed to ever separate ourselves into "us" and "them," especially in matters of faith? If Jesus himself claims to be the instrument of separation, what chance do we have to live truly as God's children, without wanting to hurt – or at least disempower - "those" members of the family before they hurt "us?"

The traditional interpretation of this gospel passage is that Jesus is warning us that being a Christian – in the fullest sense of the word – must include suffering. It means standing up for what we know is right and just, even when such a stand is guaranteed to make us unpopular. It means treating hateful people with love. It means putting aside our natural competitiveness in order to put others *first*.

Put that into today's world: Are we still compelled to suffer, to be counter-cultural and unpopular for the sake of the gospel, even when we, ourselves, are so terribly threatened?

Yes.

What Jesus is saying, I think, is that as his followers, we are *mandated* – no option here, this is not a suggestion – to stand apart from the comfort and safety of huddling inside a group of like-minded people, against those who disagree. We are to step away from that lifestyle and engage the *life* that Jesus desires for us. We, you and I, are to stand apart and take loving one another seriously. No amount of church-going and committee work and outreach hours logged can atone for our not doing so.

And we are to pray – not pray that we will be safe, but that those who live by the sword, or by violent words that cut like a sword, will have their hearts turned and strangely warmed. We are to love the hard-to-love. If that separates us, mother from daughter, father from son, then so be it. For the moment. Because in the long run, true reconciliation – between parent and child, between relatives, between friends, between nations – can only come through the love of God. We know that in our heart of hearts. We need to apply it to our lives,

our everyday lives. Maybe this *is* the right message for Father's Day, after all. Only by depending on God's grace, can we truly be - not "us" and "them" - but *we*.

Some of you may recognize this short poem by Edwin Markham that is worth hearing again this morning:

*He drew a circle that shut me out.
Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout.
But love and I had the wit to win:
We drew a circle that took him in.*

In the name of Christ, may we all live the truth of this greater love. *Amen.*

Readings: Jeremiah 20:7-13; Psalm 69: 7-10, 16-18; Romans 5:15b-19; Matthew 10:16-33.