

There's a phrase to describe Jesus in today's gospel—He's gone from preaching to meddling. That's what they call it in the South when a preacher leaves his or her text and starts talking about you... when he hits a congregation's sore points or trots out your business or your foibles in front of everybody and makes an example of them. It's the prophet Jesus speaking some uncomfortable truth we'd rather not face, or Dr. Jesus inviting the patient to be well but saying we've got to change our behavior and habits to get there, or the suffering servant who can't hide his agony because the stakes are too high. Jesus has gone from preaching to meddling, because he just can't help himself.

Consider the context: Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem where he will confront the powers that be of every kind—religious, political, economic, cultural—and he speaks as both a leader near the end of his mission, and as a prophet with insight about a hinge of history. It's no wonder this scripture stirs us so deeply, as well: the stabbing of an author on the stage at Chautauqua, 1st and 2nd graders shot at school in the spring, violence against women legitimized, the continuing vulnerability of black bodies, the rise of Christian nationalism, politicians and pundits playing games with the truth. This present moment, like Jesus' time, begs for interpretation.

“Get on board!” Jesus calls to us. “Count the cost of your allegiance. Decide now who you will serve and what your priorities will be.” Clearly this period in his life is not the expansive, amorphous beginning of ministry, but the white-hot focus of the end. His words are less, “Y'all come” and more “Are you for me or against me?” You see, he is about to be killed for what he stands for, and he knows it: inclusion, compassion, justice, repair, healing, welcome, love. These are the stepstones of the Way. Yet the powers that be hold in contempt such a commitment to solidarity and human thriving ... They did then and they still can now. But here's what I know:

The world is too dangerous for anything but truth, and too small for anything but love. So beat your swords into ploughshares, Jesus says, because hate will surely starve us.

“Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth?” he asks, and my heart of hearts says, “Yes, I hope so.” ... Yours too, I imagine. But his answer is “No, I tell you, but rather division.” And he goes on: “From now on five in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three; they will be divided: father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother.” And he calls his audience hypocrites: “You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky,” he scoffs, “but you do not know how to interpret this present time.” What is he up to? Why does Jesus hurl such arrows?

Some of the answer is that Jesus is speaking publicly in this passage, addressing a crowd with an orator’s tools. He is painting with broad, even harsh brush strokes to make a point, and sacrificing subtlety to get the audience’s attention. It’s not a stretch to believe that he hopes the folks listening, like us, will finally sort themselves out after hearing these words. If the division between intimates that he describes is the consequence of discernment—when some turn from the way things are in order to build the world as it ought to be—then it’s a necessary step toward consciousness that the Spirit hopes we’ll embrace. And that is good, if difficult news.

Like the spouse who realizes she has to step out of an abusive relationship, or the couple who admit their transgressions to each other and in that place of honesty decide to begin again, or the son who says to the father, “I have to make my own way,” or the city that confronts its legacy of racism and takes action to repair the breach, facing the fact of division is a necessary means to a better, more wholesome end. “This is what it is going to cost me to follow the living God,” the crowd is invited to think, “so I better start to figure it out right now.”

Have I let some part of my family dynamic keep me from being all that I can be? Am I still harboring resentment from some battle I fought and lost years ago? If I have a grievance with my brother or my neighbor or my colleague, do I confront it, or do I deny its existence and let it fester? What reconciling work is there for me to do in local or national politics? How do I foster space for people to disagree, learn from each other, and then act for the common good?

Sometimes the leader of a movement reminds her followers of the stakes involved and asks again if they are in or if they are out. This is one of those moments. When Jesus says he brings fire to the earth, are we willing to submit the chaff in ourselves to such refining?

Priest and Jungian analyst John Sanford likens this process to a purging, in which the individual is separated from his tribalism and thus made fit for the kingdom. He quotes the Gospel of Thomas which has Jesus say, “whoever is near to me is near to the fire, and whoever is far from me is far from the kingdom.” This is how we can make sense of Jesus’s language of division: to follow his way is to lose the crutch of prejudice and the questionable comfort of groupthink, to burn away the dross of standing on the sidelines. For the closer we are to God consciousness, stepping onto the touchstones of inclusion, compassion, justice, repair, healing, welcome, and love, the more fully we become our selves. And that is how God’s kingdom comes.

Norman Corwin writes, “Years ago, while watching a baseball game on television, I saw Orel Hershiser, pitching for the Dodgers, throw a fastball that hit a batter. The camera was on a close-up of Hershiser, and I could read his lips as he mouthed, “I’m sorry.” The batter, taking first base, nodded to the pitcher in a friendly way and the game went on.

Just two words, and I felt good about Hershiser and the batter and the game all at once. It was only a common courtesy, but it made an impression striking enough for me to remember after many summers.

The blood relatives of common courtesy are kindness, sympathy, and consideration. And the reward for exercising them is to feel good about having done so. When a motorist at an intersection signals to another who's waiting to join the flow of traffic, "Go ahead, it's okay, move in," and the recipient of the favor smiles and makes a gesture of appreciation, the giver enjoys a glow of pleasure. It's a very little thing, but it represents something quite big.

Ultimately its related to compassion, a quality in very short supply lately—and getting scarcer.

But look, let's not kid ourselves. It would be foolish to hope that kindness, consideration, and compassion will right wrongs, heal wounds, and keep the peace, and set the new century on a course to recover from inherited ills. That would be asking a lot from even a heaven-sent methodology, and heaven is not in that business.

It comes down to the value of examples, which can be either positive or negative, and it works like this: Because of the principle that a calm sea and prosperous voyage do not make news but a shipwreck does, most circulated news is bad news. The badness of it is publicized, and the negative publicity attracts more of the same through repetition and imitation.

But good can be as communicable as evil, and that is where kindness and compassion come into play. So long as conscionable and caring people are around, so long as they are not muted or exiled, so long as they remain alert in thought and action, there is a chance for contagions of the right stuff, whereby democracy becomes no longer a choice of lesser evils, whereby the right to vote is not betrayed by staying away from the polls, whereby the freedoms of speech, assembly, religion, and dissent are never forsaken.

But why linger? Why wait to begin planting seeds, however long they take to germinate? It took us 200 plus years to get into the straits we now occupy, and it may take us as long again to get

out, but there must be a beginning.” (Norman Corwin, On a Note of Triumph, recorded in This I Believe)