

Reading our gospel lesson this week, what stood out for me was Jesus speaking of “A kingdom divided.”

He is responding to the scribes that accuse him of casting out demons by the power of the ruler of demons - Beelzebub (A name for Satan derived from a Philistine god and generally associated with the Canaanite high god Baal). He responds, “a kingdom working at cross purposes, or divided, cannot stand.” The same is true of a house or family – it will not be able to stand. And it’s true of Satan himself as well. This word about the strong man and the plundering of his house illustrates what he’s saying, describing himself as the plunderer of the demonic world who casts out and subdues demons – he’s against them, not with them. (JAB)

These are not threatening words unless you’re looking around at the world and our country today. What one calls a long-awaited conviction, another calls a sham. What one calls a pandemic, another calls a hoax. What one calls an election won, another calls stolen. You’ve heard enough from the voices on both sides holding up their truths, and me up here talking about it, to see clearly that this is a nation divided. Jesus, responding to the accusations of the scribes, is telling them and us that such kingdoms do not stand for long.

But national and familial communities aside, individuals can be divided against themselves too. The conflict we see around us can be found within us as well. This personal dividedness takes a certain tone especially when it comes to our relationship with God. We want closeness and connection with God, but our guilt and shame prevent us from trusting that God wants these things too. In prayer, we are invited to confess our longings, “but shrink from the dialogue that is possible.” It’s the internal, fundamental tension between our “human moral frailty and some kind of [impossible, but promised] restoration.” Faith and spiritual practice are often a mix of “push and pull, defiance and longing all in a jumble.” Is this not true for at least some of us?

(Timothy Jones 7.2021 CC)

This is part of what we see in the garden. God calls out to Adam and Adam is convicted: “He knows that communion has been disrupted – in God’s desired order for creation and in himself, as the breaker of that order. He’s ashamed and afraid. God calls to him, “Where are you?” Adam first confesses his shame (not what he’s done), then quickly blames Eve, who in turn blames the serpent. Blame is a very common, defensive move to make – perhaps particularly common for those divided. Sadly, this move only increases the divisions between us. (TJC)

And we even see division here with Jesus. As his blood family is calling to him, what does he say? “Who are my mother and my brothers?” And looking at those who sat around him, he said, ‘Here are my mother and brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.’”

In stories like these where the good news is hard to see, we can widen our gaze to the broader story and remember that with the Lord there is steadfast love and great power to redeem. “What is the part of that story that this story tells?” we ask.

We know that God is committed to both great diversity (clearly), and to complete Unity. Hearing two Sundays ago about the Trinity, we were reminded of God’s unity in multiplicity. If we take seriously the possibility that the Trinity is more than church doctrine, it means that relationship is at the heart of God. And if that’s true, relationship with you and me (called to the table in unity with God and each other) is God’s relentless pursuit.

I read this week that “God asks questions in scripture not to get information, but to elicit response.” What then is the response God might be seeking to elicit from Adam when God asks, “Where are you?” Perhaps an honest confession of what was done, trust enough to not want to hide? Perhaps the true rupture of creation in this story was not eating the apple but succumbing to the impulse to hide from himself and God - to instead blame and divide from both God and Eve.

If we follow that logic, what is Jesus doing when he says, “These are my mother and sisters and brothers – those who do the will of God”?

The bigger story exerts an influence on the way we can see this. Peter Marty writes that “Jesus creates [with these words] a new concept of family, one based not on blood but on love in action... [By] dethroning the biological family and asking us to transcend our genealogy and clan [, we] become members of a larger family of faith.” Jesus is not disowning anyone as his family. Rather he’s expanding the definition of family to include all people in the unity God first intended. (Peter Marty 1.2020 CC)

Two things stand out to me about this. First, that this familial unity is not about sameness or agreement. Some have speculated that Jesus blood family was on the scene to reign him in – “restrain” is the word used by the text. We are a community that does not agree all the time. But Jesus tells us to reach for what he makes possible – unity with him, God, Spirit, and each other.

Second, this family should be determined not by blood but by “love in action” It’s not the warm and fuzzy love, the kind that makes us feel good. This love has teeth. So what does this broader, fierce familial “love-in-action” look like? Cornel West tells us that “Justice is what Love looks like in public.” Justice is a word that goes by a few different definitions here in the Mountain West, but my definition sits alongside words like Fairness.

Something akin to fairness is what we’ll be putting in our coffee mugs during fellowship this summer, and perhaps beyond. Supporting small coffee farmers through a cooperative coffee distributor is one way we will practice “love in action”. Perhaps, too, this will grow our idea of family alongside that of Jesus.

The Original Unity God wanted and created all things in was broken. God invites us to participate in the re-creation of that unity and it requires action. I hope we can root around together and discover what more we can do for the sake of this unity, and that a wider, sturdier kin-dom might be found.

AMEN