

Rev. Kurt Cockran, Risen Savior Lutheran Church (Basehor, KS), 10th Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 15), August 14th, 2022

If Thou Lord Wert Not Near Me

Luke 12:49-53

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ,

Today's text, I admit, is difficult. **“Do you think that I have come to give peace on earth? No, I tell you, but rather division.”** So, as we ought to do with any difficult verse, let us pray, “O Holy Spirit, this saying from Jesus is true, for you spoke it through the Evangelist Luke. We will not doubt it, but only wish to explore *how* it's true. Help us to understand this text rightly and apply it to our lives. In Jesus' name. Amen.”

“I came to give...division.” This is an anti-theology of glory verse if there ever was one. That is, what does the perfect church look like? As nice as it looks for a church to have every member of every family present every Sunday, Jesus here indicates to even *expect* divisions in our families, and even sadly within the external visible family of God, because of Him. Because of righteousness standing firm, against our *constant* inclinations against Him.

Jesus' words require a bit more perspective, not to explain away His words, but to build upon them with other words elsewhere. Scripture interpreting Scripture. Well, how about peace? Was it not the angels who themselves said on Christmas Night, **“Glory to God in the highest, and peace to His people on earth.”** So, which is it, Jesus? Are you the bringer of peace or not? And don't you love families, Jesus? “Let the little children come to me,” you said.” On the surface, this Gospel reading may seem like it contradicts with other parts of Scripture, but it doesn't. Jesus is a master of the hyperbole, the effective use of exaggeration in order to help a point hit home. For example, instead of saying simply, “do everything possible to avoid temptation,” why say that when you could say, “If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body

be thrown into hell.” The point hits home harder. Avoid temptation. Seriously. And Jesus uses this method to keep us balanced on the straight and narrow path forward. The Holy Spirit even often uses these strong verses by bringing them to the forefront of our minds at the times that best serve His will to save.

Context also helps our perspective. Looking backwards in the chapter, and what we read two weeks ago, Jesus said, **“Take care, and be on your guard against all covetousness, for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions.”** Don’t make your stuff into gods, into idols. Last week, a similar point with a similar verse: **“life is more than food, and the body more than clothing.”** The one true God in Christ is our treasure. Nothing else is to top Him in our love.

For *anything* that’s created and good in all creation can become an idol. *Anything* can be feared, loved, and trusted in above God. And even if we say God is still above all, in our sin, in our great weakness, our actions often undermine our words, that we do love God foremost. Examine yourself. Repent. Anything can become the object of our worship instead of the Lord if we’re not on guard. Your house provides you with needful shelter. It can also easily become your god. A good government provides us with economic freedom to enhance human flourishing, and gives us peace of mind knowing our streets are safe. But how our zeal for a good government can likewise become your god, consuming your thoughts. Even the church, broadly speaking and locally speaking, can become a temptation for some to worship her instead of Christ, to put our hope in the externals of the church instead of the Word made flesh.

And finally, the great creation of families...and members within them... can become an idol. God loves families. He knows they’re the foundation to society. He created marriage, and through marriage made the family unit and calls it good.

But how easy it is to place our loved ones before God, to seek to please them before God. We all struggle against this *family-olatry* in different ways. That's what the text today is truly about. The parallel account in Matthew is our main help:

There, Jesus says, **“I have not come to bring peace, but a sword...Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me.”**³⁸ **And whoever does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me.**³⁹ **Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.**

To see one example of what this looks like, consider this story from a C.S. Lewis book called *The Great Divorce*. The whole book is a fascinating thought experiment of the people of heaven talking with those in hell, and helping the reader see how the condemned really condemn themselves through their various idolatries. I don't recommend this book unconditionally, but has some good things in it. Well in one chapter, we meet Pam, the mother of Michael. When the citizen of heaven meets her, Pam is looking everywhere for her Michael. As the story unfolds, we learn that Michael had had an early death on earth. Her sorrow was great, and never lifted. The citizen of heaven wants to help her see the true love of God for both her and her son. But about God, the mother says, “If [God] loved me He'd let me see my boy. If He loved me why did He take Michael away from me?”

“Partly for his sake,” the man says, “...And secondly, for your sake. He wanted your merely instinctive love for your child to turn into something better. He wanted you to love Michael as God understands love. You cannot love a fellow-creature fully till you love God.”

Nevertheless, she continues to argue with him, and her argument is understandable “This is all nonsense,” she says, “cruel and wicked nonsense. What *right* have you to say things like that about Mother-love? It is the highest and holiest feeling in human nature.”

“Pam, Pam,” he says, “[No feelings are holy in themselves. They are holy only when God’s hand is involved.]”

She continues to argue her worthiness for heaven, and especially to be with her son, by saying, “[Didn’t] I live only for his memory all these years.”

“That was rather a mistake, Pam...all that ten years’ ritual of grief. Keeping his room exactly as he’d left it: keeping anniversaries: refusing to leave that house, though Dick and Muriel were both wretched there.”

Like a skilled soul-surgeon, he carefully diagnoses her idolatry of her son, even after he died. But to no avail. She continues to say, “Give me my boy. I don’t care about all your rules and regulations. I don’t believe in a God who keeps mother and son apart. I believe in a God of love... No one has a right to come between me and my son. He is mine, do you understand? Mine, mine, mine, for ever and ever.”

Pam is relatable, and has a good side. We all have our loved ones who we *yearn* to be with in heaven. This is a fine desire, and fine to have as a frequent prayer, that my son or daughter would be converted, re-converted, or simply remain steadfast in the faith until life everlasting. Nevertheless, we must keep in mind the other side of Pam, the unbelief side. We must be able to look at our loved ones (note the temptation with how we even call them our “loved ones”)... We must be able to say honestly about our cherished family members: I love God more than you, and that’s good. And it’s *because* of God’s love for us that we have any true love to share for each other.” The natural loves of this earth – the plants, the mountains, the

beach, the bliss of that perfect kiss with your child or spouse – these natural loves will rise again and live forever in the new creation. But for you to enjoy them in the new creation, for these delights to rise again *for you*...they must first be *buried* underneath what is your highest love. There is but one good; that is God. Everything else is good when it looks to Him, and bad when it turns from Him.

So Jesus calls us to be fully aware of what we love, and how much we love. Place your fear, love, and trust in God above all other things, including your family, and you will have peace with God and peace in your family; that is, peace with the others who see Christ the same way. When this happens, God be praised.

But for the rest, for those in the family who cling to their various idols, expect division, and it's okay. It'll be okay. Even in the midst of family fights, Christ remains your brother. God remains your Father. The Church remains your true brothers and sisters, always. Forever. The Christian mother and Christian daughter may well get along, but don't be surprised at the fiery trials when mother-in-law goes against daughter-in-law, or father against son, as though something strange were happening. But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed, and on that day you will stand next to your true brothers and sisters who are all together looking at Jesus.

To conclude, consider how one of the greatest hymns in our hymnal puts this so beautifully.

“Lord, Thee I love with all my heart; (not my family members or possessions... *Thee* I love with all my heart)

I pray Thee, ne'er from me depart, With tender mercy cheer me.
Earth has no pleasure I would share...

Yea, heav'n itself were void and bare

If Thou, Lord, wert not near me.”

Heaven itself would be void and bare – heaven would be *nothing* – nothing! – void and bare! – if the Lord weren't there. Near me.

“Thou art the portion I have sought;

Thy precious blood my soul has bought.

Lord Jesus Christ, my God and Lord, my God and Lord,

Forsake me not! I trust Thy Word.

Amen.”