

August 18, 2019

Jesus said, "I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled!...Do you think that I've have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division!" Do you think that's how Jesus delivered those lines? Isn't that how the gentle Jesus meek and mild we learned about in Sunday School would offer them? Perhaps.

But sometimes I think we've domesticated Jesus so much, made Jesus into such a perfect gentleman, that run the risk of missing his message. I think most Christians have tended to tame down Jesus, including Episcopalians. After all, we are the people who think of hell as a place where we are forced to eat a 5 course meal with our salad fork. We want a civilized Jesus, thank you very much.

Keep in mind this is the same Jesus who regularly told off the Pharisees and Sadducees. And it is the same Jesus who turned over tables and took up a whip to drive out the moneychangers. Regardless of what we want, and in spite of what we are taught I Sunday School, sometimes the Jesus we encounter in the Gospels is neither gentle nor meek. I think today's Gospel passage is more accurately read like this: (repeat above)

It is not a pleasant message, but I think it is one we all need to hear. Perhaps we need to be consumed by Jesus' fire, to be tempered and purified. Burning with that kind of passion is going to hurt. It will bring with it confrontations and divisions.

Yes, confrontations. Sometimes, confrontations are necessary for two people, or two groups to effectively communicate. And sometimes these confrontations can cause temporary divisions.

But, the alternative is to attempt to avoid conflict at every turn, thinking that keeping the peace and avoiding conflict is the Christian thing to do. Peace at any price is rarely true peace. Appeasement is not the solution when it comes to conflict. We must boldly stand for what is good and seek to resolve conflict, not avoid it.

Being nice can be a virtue, but it can also be a vice, if we use it as an excuse to take the path of least resistance. Jesus could indeed be gentle, but he could also be tough, when the situation called for it.

Let me give you an example. Consider the way ethical arguments are carried out today. To make it simple, I'll use two camps within the broader category of Utilitarianism; the Deontologists and the Consequentialists. Deontology focuses on the rightness or the wrongness of the acts themselves, usually basing their judgment on some external rule base, making some acts always right, and some acts always wrong. Consequentialists consider the consequences of each act, usually basing their decision on what will provide the greatest good for the greatest number (North Atlantic).

The problem is that usually when a Deontologist and Consequentialist start arguing, they yell right over the top of each other, fully convinced that the other person is wrong, and maybe even evil, for trying to justify such horrible ethical standards. Never mind that both ways of doing

ethics can be supported by the Christian scriptures, or tradition and human reason. They usually can't hear each other in the midst of such confrontations.

Does this mean such confrontations are not worthwhile? Not at all. I think such passionate exchanges are sometimes a very important form of communication.

My stepmother was from Greece. She had nine brothers and sisters. Their idea of a "good time" was to sit around the large table in Uncle Cosmos' kitchen, sip wine, nibble cheese, and argue. These were loud, passionate arguments, on every topic you could imagine. Often, it was this same deontology versus consequentialism conflict. And sometimes, every once in awhile, they would hear each other, and their positions on a topic would slightly shift. But, when it came time to go home, everyone would warmly embrace, and comment on how much they enjoyed the evening. A form of communication? I think so.

Let's return to the Deontologists and Consequentialists yelling at each other. In our current culture, and especially among various kinds of Christians, this Deontology versus Consequentialism debate has gone on for so long, with neither side really listening to the other, that a lot of folks have started to tune it out. But that doesn't mean they don't use some standard for making ethical decisions. It seems to me that the new standard, quietly adopted by many who have given up on our cultural debates is Hedonism; what is best for me is always the greatest good.

You don't have to look too far to find this kind of thinking in our culture. Folks might not publically claim it, but their actions reveal their ethics. You find it among some Christians as well. I'm sure we've all met folks whose attitude seems to be "as long I have my ticket to heaven, to hell with everyone else."

I don't know how to respond sometimes to the Deontology and Consequentialism confrontations. I can see valid points in both perspectives. And, to some degree, I'm glad those passionate debates continue. Yes, they cause divisions. Yes, they seem to consume our public discourse like a fire, sometimes. But, I think these are important conversations.

However, when it comes to this new breed of Hedonists, I think we have a responsibility to stand up against such behavior. Making individual salvation the main point of Christianity is to twist our faith into some kind of Darwinian survival of the fittest hybrid. I don't think that's what Jesus had in mind.

To quote the infamous Blues Brothers, we are on a mission from God. We are to be conduits of God's grace, of course. But I think it is a mistake when we translate that into a command to always "be nice."

We are called to transform this world for Christ. And such a radical transformation will require the occasional confrontation. Let us not shrink from our calling to bring light into the dark places of this world. Let us boldly proclaim the Good News that God's Kingdom is at hand.