

Lectionary 20C 2019, Luke 12:49-56, August 18, 2019, Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Lancaster, Pa., Kurt S. Strause

Jesus is anti-family. How else can we interpret these words from Luke's gospel this morning?

You might think I'm just being deliberately provocative to get your attention. But think for a moment what Jesus is saying here. He's calling into question the very heart and foundation of most cultures and societies; the family. Social scientists tie the health of families to the health of societies as a whole. Political and social movements emphasizing a return to "family values" arise when its perceived culture is sliding downhill to chaos.

Here comes Jesus telling us he is going to deliberately break up families. These are hard words coming from one we usually associate with gentleness and peace. But he says he doesn't come to bring peace, but rather division.

Jesus speaks at a time when your family was everything. Your social security plan, your medical plan, your pension plan. There was no governmental social safety net to take care of you when you lost your job, became ill or too old to work. That was your family's role and it's why you stuck with them and they stuck with you.

Jesus' words today are descriptive of the experience of early Christians. Conflicts arose within families when someone converted to following Christ. Family cohesion depended upon everyone remaining within the same religion. There was no religious tolerance.. A member who rejected the family's religion by embracing another faith also rejected the family as well. Families often found themselves torn apart because one or two or three became believers and were then kicked out of their biological family.

Arising from the division comes a new way of thinking about family among followers of Jesus. Relationships are not based on biological kinship, but rather on a relationship with Jesus centered on faith. We become a member of a new family, not based on blood or religion, but on faith in this one particular person. The story is told in another part of the gospels which illustrates this point. Jesus is told by some townspeople that his brothers and sisters and mother wish to see him. They mean of course Mary, his biological mother and his blood relatives. Jesus takes a look at the crowd listening to him and he says, "these are my mother, and brothers and my sisters. Those who hear the will of God and do it are my mother and my brothers and my sisters." The family which Jesus creates is based on faith.

So when I say Christianity is anti-family I mean that your relationship to Jesus is not found on your birth certificate, but on your baptismal certificate. Maybe your Christian parents brought you to church, they may have stood beside

you as you were baptized. You are and continue to be a Christian through faith. Not blood. Not birth. Not race. Not family.

I recognize how powerful family is. From a social point of view the strength of families matters greatly. But the church must be a place that makes space and reaches out to those who don't fit the traditional mold of mother, father, and 2.1 children. Ministry among those who are single, with the divorced, single parents, with same gendered marriages, with those who are LGBT is often pushed to the side because it challenges our traditional understanding of family. Census data tells us however that fewer than half of the family units in our city fit the description of a traditional nuclear family. Yet we continue to act and think that this is our primary focus for mission and ministry in the community.

I believe Jesus is calling us to live and act differently. We are to take our place within the Christian community seriously. Our task then is live with authentically Christian family values. Not the often cynically flouted "family values" of politicians. Rather the Christian community of Jesus' followers as our primary family.

I would like to suggest three principles to keep in mind as we think about what it means to live as Jesus' family: 1.) The Christian sitting beside you in the pew is more your brother or sister than your own relatives. When you look at another Christian you are looking at your true family. These are the ones you will live with throughout all eternity. 2.) Mission which seeks to invite and welcome people who look, act and think like your own earthly families is not Christian mission at all. Mission is about introducing people to their new family, a family based on faith, not birth. 3.) A Christian community will have its disagreements within itself. The key is to remember that family ties where Jesus is everybody's brother are not to be broken over trivial matters. Jesus suffered and died that he might draw us together into one family. We may not abandon one another because of some slight or hurt feelings.

A truly welcoming Christian community is one which seeks to invited and welcome new family members to itself continually. It is not afraid of those who are different. Indeed, it sees in them potential future brothers and sisters in Christ. The family which calls Jesus its brother is always reaching out and seeking new family members. The Christian family is always taking risks, always reaching out. Jesus wants the largest family he can get. Amen.