

*For I have come to set a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law, and one's foes will be members of one's own household.* Happy Father's Day! Since Father's Day is not a liturgical holiday, it is only by coincidence that this gospel is appointed in the lectionary today, but even if this were not a day for celebrating family, these words of Jesus still seem strange—as if Jesus forgot the good tidings of great joy that the angels shared at his birth—*Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace.* Now that he is all grown up, Jesus tells us he has *not* come to bring peace but a sword. In this world that is full to overflowing with conflict, strife, even violence, what are we to do with this Jesus who promises to further divide to our already broken human community? We certainly have siblings in the body of Christ who are happy stop right here and say, *See, Jesus told us that we are supposed to be at war with one another.* And they find no shortage of enemies to fight, both within Christianity and certainly against anyone outside the faith. But does Jesus really desire more hostility? After all, enemies in one's own household and daughters-in-law against mothers-in-law...we don't need Jesus for that; we can do that on our own. What more is going on here?

We've been reading for a couple weeks now Jesus' instructions to the disciples as he sends them out to proclaim the coming of the kingdom. This is a continuation of that pep talk, a clarification of expectations: their mission is going to be difficult, and they won't always be well-received. They should be prepared for opposition, even persecution. By the time Matthew writes these words, his community was already experiencing the difficulties Jesus hints at in this passage. Jewish Christians were expelled from their synagogues for following Jesus as the Messiah; gentile Christians found themselves at odds with the mainstream culture when they gave up the many gods of the Roman Empire to become monotheistic Christians. The movement Jesus started split communities between those who chose to follow him and those who believed they were being faithful by *not* following him. Sometimes that divide happened right down the middle of families.

But Jesus did not create division for division's sake. That was not the intent of his mission but a byproduct of it. I realize that I'm crossing over into John's gospel here, but in Jesus' own words, he came that we may have life and have it abundantly. However, abundant life for all requires unjust and inequitable systems to change, and change—even just a little change—usually causes conflict. Our Bible study leader at Assembly yesterday talked about how the life of faith regularly requires us to do the Hokey Pokey...you turn yourself around, repenting from ungodly ways of life in order to pursue life as God intends us to live it. But, if things are working well for us, we don't want to change. If we're at peace with the way things are, we don't want to hear the call to repentance, even if it is the sword Jesus brings to cut us off from the ways of life that are not good for us or good for the community.