

One of the things I'm not very good at is Christmas cards. I don't keep an updated address book, so I might get a few cards in the mail before January to people who first sent me cards with their return address clearly labeled on the envelope. Complicating matters, I have some friends and family who are not particularly religious, so I try to be sensitive, especially as a pastor, not to send cards that come across as proselytizing to those whose spirituality is different than mine. Yet, secular, commercialized Christmas isn't what I want to convey either. So I often gravitate toward something with a "peace on earth" message, which unfortunately is always relevant in our war-torn world. We associate peace on earth with the birth of Christ because the angels announce it to the shepherds in Luke's gospel, but grown-up Jesus is quite adamant that he did *not* come to bring peace to the earth. That's not very Christmasy, but it is an honest commentary on how the Word of God incarnate impacts our human community.

By the time we get to today's passage in Luke's gospel, Jesus has already unsettled people nearly everywhere he has gone. He scares his parents by staying behind in the temple; he preaches in his hometown and almost gets thrown off a cliff; in the sermon on the plain he reverses everyone's definition of what it means to be blessed; he eats with tax collectors, forgives sins, and heals on the sabbath—all things that exasperate the Pharisees; he declines a visit with his biological mother and brothers, announcing instead that those who put God's word into practice are his family; and he tells parables with surprise endings where, surprise! the people who were normally assumed to be good—that is, rich people, religious people, Israelite people—end up being the bad guys, and the people society deemed unworthy are portrayed as exemplars of faith. Jesus confounds expectations, embodying a more loving, more merciful, more inclusive vision for our world, and that different vision leads to conflict: division between Jesus and those who reject his message, and division amongst people who interpret Jesus' message differently.

I've been reading a book titled *The Age of Grievance* which criticizes our current culture for being almost happier when we are fighting against someone or something, especially if we feel like we're the injured party. Jesus' prediction here has been used to fuel that climate of grievance and division. We tell ourselves that we should be at odds with others because we're being faithful and they're not; and if we, who are faithful, are still not getting our own way, then it must be because we are victims of ungodly people. Maybe, sometimes. But if we pay attention to who God advocates for in scripture, it's pretty hard for most of us to paint ourselves as the underdogs most of the time. *The weak, the orphan, the humble, the needy, the poor*—that's who God is saving in Psalm 82. We'd like to think we always fit into the group that God

champions, but that's not always the case. At camp we sing *God's gonna turn this world upside down*; next we're going to sing a version of the Magnificat—Mary's song, claiming *the world is about to turn*. That's good news to people who are underwater in this life, but bad news to people for whom this world is working pretty well as it is. Jesus, who announces that he has come to set the oppressed free, isn't going to make too many friends among the oppressors.

Jesus does *not* say he has come to bring division for its own sake or that he desires division. Instead, Jesus is honest about the predictable consequences of his intervention in the world—in the way true prophets always were honest when they spoke difficult realities instead of telling people what they that they wanted to hear. The truth is that Jesus' living example of God's love causes division because not everyone hears God's good news as good news *for them*. If we were better at seeing ourselves as inextricably linked to one another instead of primarily as individuals, we might better understand that God's liberating love of others is also good news to us—even if it doesn't seem to improve circumstances for us personally, *or even if it requires us to change* to serve the greater good. We like that *the gospel comforts the afflicted but afflicts the comfortable*, as long as we see ourselves as the afflicted. When we're the comfortable ones, we don't want to hear the ways in which the gospel challenges us to share, to compromise, even to sacrifice for someone else. We know that the world has to change if there is any hope for so many people who are living without dignity, security, safety, or adequate resources, and in the abstract, we *want* change. But we don't want *to change*, and that's a problem, because Jesus calls us to the never-ending work of growth—growth in love and service to God and growth in love and service to others. And we can't grow if we won't change.

There are certainly reasons to look at our world today, to see how far we are from where we should be and need to be, and agree with Jesus: *Come! cast fire upon the earth! How I wish it were already ablaze!* But instead of waiting for Jesus to burn it all down, let Jesus' words light a fire under us—to get us moving, to get us challenging what we know needs to be transformed, in the world and in ourselves, in order to reflect more fully God's loving intentions for us, for the whole human community, and for all of creation. Yes, that's going to cause division, even dividing some of our closest, dearest relationships. But keeping the peace on the surface won't bring about deep, vital change, for our own sake or for the sake of the world that God so loves. But we take heart: we received the Spirit in baptism to help us do hard things—not to be merely spectators but to run the race with perseverance. Wherever that course takes us, whatever it divides us from or unites us to, may the Word of God not leave us as it found us.