

You've Got to be Taught

*"I have come to light a fire on the earth and how I wish it were already blazing!  
Do you think I have come to establish peace on the earth?  
No - I tell you; but rather division!  
A house of five will be divided: three against two and two against three."  
(Luke 12:49)*

Sisters and brothers, what is Jesus trying to get at with these words that at first hearing, seem to be so contrary to his message of peace that permeates The Gospel?

Put simply, Jesus is saying: 'If you truly want peace you must work for justice...' and when you work for justice: you rock the boat..., you disturb business as usual..., you can be a source of division.

Jesus didn't end-up on the Cross because he healed the sick and fed the hungry. Jesus was murdered by Capital Punishment because he challenged the religious and secular policies and systems of his day that oppressed people...; that were unjust...; that created insiders and outsiders...; that caused many to be hungry while a few lived in luxury. And, because Jesus was so filled with fire to bring about the world God intended, he couldn't be silent in the face of injustice.

Jeremiah, in our 1<sup>st</sup> Reading, was thrown into the cistern, the well, to die because he challenged the power-brokers of his day... and we have many contemporary examples: Martin Luther King, Ghandi, the four Church-women in El Salvador, the Jesuits at the University of El Salvador, Sr. Dorothy Stang in the rain forest of Brazil..., all prophets who became martyrs because their hearts were blazing to set a fire on the earth, to wake us up before it's too late; dreaming of the world as God intended. We too – as disciples of Jesus – are called to support movements for racial justice, to end sexism, to abolish economic unfairness, to challenge consumerism, to march to eliminate nuclear weapons.... All of these prophets and martyrs brought about change in the company of millions of feet following them. We need to walk the talk with these movements of liberation, in our day-to-day life, in our families, in our relationships, in the workplace... we need to speak the truth — even when it might rock the boat.

Let me share a couple of stories:

Tommy was looking for his sixth grade classroom in a new school and asked directions from a boy walking by. The boy quietly pointed to Tom's room, not smiling and never looking directly at Tom. Before Tom could thank him, the boy disappeared.

At recess Tom caught up with the boy who had helped him. The boy said his name was Kyle and that he was also in the sixth grade. They talked about the stuff that sixth-graders talk about. At one point, Kyle almost smiled. They met after school, shot baskets and got some Cokes. That evening at supper, Tom's parents asked how the first day went. "Okay," Tom said: he liked his teachers for the most part, lunch was alright... and: he met this kid...

A look of concern immediately came over their faces when Tom mentioned Kyle's name. Maybe Tom better steer clear of Kyle, they strongly suggested... there were stories about his family: his father never seems to be around... there was an arrest or something and he's *probably* in jail; they'd heard that one of Kyle's brothers has a long criminal record... and didn't they live in the Projects...?

But what did that have to do with Kyle, Tom wondered... he's a nice kid.

Still mom and dad insisted they'd feel much more comfortable if Tom didn't hang out with Kyle.

The next day at school, Kyle was the first to see Tom. "Hi!" Kyle said, still not exactly smiling, but with an easiness that wasn't there yesterday. "Hey," Tom said ... .. and Tom kept walking.

Tom never spent any more time with Kyle and Tom never really told his parents anymore about school or anything else that really mattered.

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A second story goes back to when I was in the first grade!

My twin brother, John, and I were at the kitchen table with my mother putting together the guest list for our birthday party. We were going to be six years-old! When we listed all the kids in the neighborhood we could think of, my mother said you forgot the Smith boys. Now, the Smith boys were very poor, their house that was falling apart, with junk all around it and when they came to school the kids would often make fun of them because they're clothes smelled. Our mom told us that it wasn't their fault that they were poor and it would be wrong not to invite them. The next day, the Smith boys were the first kids we invited to our party and that evening their mother called to ask our mother if it was true that the boys were invited... because they usually weren't invited to anything... .

The day of the party they were the first to arrive – all dressed-up – with two gifts, wrapped in aluminum foil! When it was time to open the presents the two gifts, wrapped in aluminum foil, were the best gifts of all: two shiny red fire-trucks!

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Sisters and brothers, Tommy's parents were good parents wanting to do what was best for their son, but were blinded by fear and cultural prejudice; and thus unable to look deeper and do what was right ... which ultimately could have been a blessing for both Tommy and Kyle, rather than feeding into cultural myths and prejudice that build walls rather than bridges.

My mother's little gesture of including the Smith boys at our birthday party was not only a teachable moment for my brother and I at six year of age, that deeply affected how I perceived others and which I have never forgotten, but also could have planted seeds of self-esteem and self-acceptance in the hearts of the Smith boys and their family.

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Yes, sisters and brothers, The Gospel of Jesus can be divisive – and confrontational. Like a two-edged sword it challenges us to grow beyond our fears and biases, our narrow-mindedness. Jesus demands more courage, more compassion, more humility than we think we are capable of... ..

To live The Gospel faithfully is to become a contradiction to those around us. The Gospel calls us to risk losing power, prestige — even acceptance — to stand up for equality, justice, compassion and reconciliation that every person – without exception – possesses by virtue of being a daughter or son of God, created in God’s image.

One final story: some of you may know of the loss of our good Father John Madden, whose funeral I attended this Saturday morning. If you knew John, you knew he was the kind of prophetic person who took up Christ’s challenge to rock the boat. Notably even his obituary included his request that – should folks wish to honor his memory – they do so by writing to The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, Most Reverend Joseph E. Kurtz, President, 3111 Fourth St. N.E, Washington DC 20017 or join an on-line petition organized by Fr. John’s nephew, Richard D. Hunt, Lancaster, NY (richard42hunt@aol.com) which states a clear and forthright expression of grassroots people that the Conference begin discussions of the Ordination of Women and of the end of Mandatory Celibacy! (As was his way, Fr. John kindly noted that should you do so: “You will not be excommunicated.”)

In conclusion I ask that together we pray for the grace that we be open in every moment of our lives to stand for what is right --- even if it rocks the boat...

Let us pray: Christ our brother,  
make us signs of contradiction to our world:  
may we be the fire of justice and righteousness,  
may we be immersed in the waters  
of humility and selflessness.  
As we stand alone for the sake of what is right and just,  
may we remember that you stand with us.  
As we find ourselves isolated and ridiculed,  
may we find meaning and hope in the example  
of your own life.

And let us say: Amen!