

Sermon for Sunday, August 14, 2016
St James Episcopal Church, St James NY
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Jesus said to his disciples,
“Do you think
that I have come
to bring peace on the earth?
No, I tell you, but rather division!
From now on
five in one household
will be divided,
three against two,
and two
against three.”

There are times
when the last thing we want to hear on Sunday morning
is the gospel.
We come here, many of us,
for a moment of peace
stolen from the middle
of our busy lives.
What we get
are words of war.
We come here
looking for encouragement, and
what we get
is as like as not
to turn us round
and send us straight back
out the door.
We come for grace
and what we get
is trouble.

And it's all Jesus' fault.

Because what we hear
in today's gospel

are fighting words,
and Jesus
is right there
in the middle of the fight.

Gentle Jesus, meek and mild,
is how the story books
traditionally pictured him,
blue eyed and blonde headed,
surrounded by laughing children,
but the Jesus we meet in this gospel
is more like a Palestinian gunman
or an Israeli soldier.

For this is war,
he declares,
It might not be a war
of guns and bombs,
but it is war nevertheless,
a war against evil
and corruption
and complacency.

Because when Jesus said these words,
this declaration of war,
he
had become
a fashion statement.
People were flocking to hear him —
crowds so huge that some were being trampled —
and it was getting difficult to tell
the true believers
from those just along
for the ride.

And then there were the others, too, salted away among the masses,
who were only there
to gather evidence,
lying in wait
until they could catch him out,
and destroy him.

These are dangerous times, say Jesus,
and you'd better watch out.
Because the danger lies not only in his enemies —
and they are dangerous enough —
but also in those who want to be his friends,
as long as it's on
their own terms.

You see, Jesus knows all too well
that the biggest danger
to the gospel he has brought to the world
is not the people who oppose it outright
but the ones
who would just gradually erode it away,
evacuating
it's meaning,
until it's nothing more
than a bundle of papers
scribbled over with nice words.

Surrounded by crowds
who appear to be followers,
he warns his disciples,
the twelve
who had given up everything,
he warns them
that a war is ahead.
Because the gospel he brings
is not just about joy and peace
but about division and struggle
and even death.

“Do you think
that I have come
to bring peace on the earth?
No, I tell you, but rather division!
From now on
five in one household
will be divided,

three against two,
and two
against three.”

We’ve come to a dangerous place, in the history of the church
the church at large, not just here on Long Island,
not just in the Episcopal Church,
we’ve come to a dangerous place,
because most of the Western world
since the time of Constantine —
roughly the last 1700 years on and off —
has regarded itself as Christian.
We’ve incorporated Christian principles
into our legal systems;
we’ve structured our moral life
around Christian virtues.
But fewer and fewer people
are part of the church,
and the stories
which formed our parents and grandparents and great-grandparents
are no longer familiar
to our children.
The word “Christian”
has all too often become
just a synonym
for “nice,”
and meanwhile
we’re busy hanging onto
the way things have always been
old structures and habits
which have served us well,
but which to the people around us
seem just the empty shells
of a bygone era.
“Life after God”
is what the novelist Douglas Coupland calls it —
he’s the one that wrote the book *Generation X*, which gave the name
to a whole generation who are now in their thirties and forties and early fifties —
Life after God,
because outside these walls

is a whole world of people
who do not know
and perhaps don't even care
about the God
we worship.

It's a dangerous time,
and in spite of the scare mongers,
I don't think it's just because of the drop in numbers
of people in church.

It's a dangerous time
because in our panic that things aren't booming
its all too easy to succumb
to the temptation
to try to make Christianity
attractive.

To try to sell it, just like we sell sneakers
and vacation packages
and self-improvement programs.

If you take a look
at some of the many church related web sites on the Internet,
you might be surprised to see how many
look like another version
of Amazon.com.

Instead of selling books, they're selling religion,
but the headlines are pretty much the same.

You need more money
Employed, prosperous and happy
Partnering for success
Praying the pounds off
Sure, they get the people in
but into what?
Is the church
no different from a mall?

Did Jesus die
just so we could be fulfilled?

These are dangerous times.
And Jesus' words

in today's gospel
are words
for dangerous times.

You see, if we listen to the marketing hype,
if we get sucked into
a success-measured picture
of what this Christian thing
is all about,
then what on earth do we do
if things don't work out?
When no matter how much we pray,
we can't lose those ten pounds,
when as hard as we work
we still struggle to pay our bills,
when our words and acts of faith
only seem to be met
with division
and pain.
Are we to think
that we haven't prayed enough?
Are we to assume
that our faith is too weak?

NO! says Jesus.
"Do you think
that I have come
to bring peace on the earth?"

You see, Jesus
wanted his disciples
to be prepared.
He wanted them
to be ready
so that when things became difficult,
they would not give up hope
or assume that they had been doing wrong.
He wanted them to know
that there would be times
when following him

would cause conflicts.
He wanted them to be ready
so that they would be able to make the right decisions
even when those were costly.

Everything looked good: there were record crowds,
and they were hanging on
to every word.
And what Jesus' disciples needed to hear
was not
"Isn't this great?"
but
"Be prepared."

Be prepared,
because this way I am leading you
is the way of sacrifice, the way of death.
None of them wanted to hear it,
but it was important,
it was important
if they were to follow their Savior on his way,
the way of the cross.

"Do you think
that I have come
to bring peace on the earth?
No, I tell you, but rather division!
From now on
five in one household
will be divided,
three against two,
and two
against three."

In marketing terms,
we're not doing so well.
There are a few extra pounds
on my hips,
and money
isn't raining down

from the sky.
But that's okay.
Because that's not
what it's all about.
Christ did not come
to found a church of success.
He came to found
a people of faith.
Faith in a God who was incarnate,
crucified and resurrected,
a God of sins forgiven
and hope restored,
a God of justice and mercy
and inexplicable love.

This is not an easy gospel:
it challenges our intellects,
because we can't prove it;
it undermines our control
because we have no power over it;
it cuts into our pride
because we can't earn it.
But this is the gospel of Christ
who offers us freedom and life and love,
and only asks in return
that we love God
with our hearts and minds and souls and lives

And of course, some will turn their backs
on this gospel, because they prefer the security
of their intellect and pride and control, they prefer the security
of a successful God.
They will forget the cost,
the Christ
who suffered death for our sake,
and leads us into new life.
They will turn their backs
on this God,
and us as well.

But when they do, we remember Christ's words: words about division
and pain, and death. And we look to the one
who has gone before us
the pioneer and perfecter of our faith,
who endured the cross, disregarding its shame
and has taken his seat
at the right hand of God.

And so, lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees,
pursue peace, and have faith,
because our God is faithful.