

When I was a student in seminary some years ago, I had a friend who was a student from Ireland named David. David had a wonderful speaking voice, and a very droll sense of humor. With his Irish brogue, he was always sure to capture the attention of his American listeners if he had a point to make.

One evening, I was in the campus dining hall finishing supper at a table with several other students. David was part of our conversation group. We were discussing something about theology and social ethics, or something related to that, as we often did around meals. I was deep in thought, and engaged in the discussion that we were having around the table. I was also fixing myself an after supper cup of tea, and had just placed a tea bag in a cup of hot water. David had been uncharacteristically quiet during the thought-provoking conversation. Then, during a pause, David announced with a degree of disgust and drama, "I think I have seen NOTHING so uncivilized in the United States..."

We all turned to look at him, expecting him to finish this sentence with a statement full of insight and related to the conversation we were having. What had David seen in the midst of American society and life that was the epitome of barbarism? What commentary was this person with an outsider's perspective going to make upon the role of the Church in modern North American society? With deep feeling and a furrowed brow, he finished his commentary: "...as..." He had our attention. What was the most uncivilized thing he had seen our people do? Neglect of the poor? Brash behavior when somber respect was needed? We were listening. "...as a TEABAG DUNKED in water."

What?! Oh no! His withering gaze was fixed upon my hand! I was holding the tab of my tea bag, and dunking it furiously up and down in my cup of hot water! I wanted it to steep quickly, because of course time passes quickly, and I had lots of studying to do that evening. "Come on, cup of tea, hurry up and brew" was my subconscious conversation with myself. I wanted a good, soothing cup of tea and I wanted it NOW!

Well, no one knew what to do but laugh. Touche for David! My bobbing teabag was a little object lesson for those at our table. How often people today want to have something instantly, and not endure waiting for a thing to arrive in its own due season. Yes, instead of allowing the tea to infuse for a few minutes and transform simple hot water into a brew of relaxing and restoring tea, I wanted my relaxing tea right now! Instantly! I didn't want to wait a few minutes. David had seen this quick paced expectancy in our daily living, and my cup of tea was the final straw for him.

But who doesn't want their needs met instantly today? Good heavens, we can see what's happening on the other side of the world two seconds after it happens thanks to satellite communications these days. How maddening it is to call the phone company or a bank with a question about service, and then be put on hold for ten minutes, often after talking to a recorded menu and pressing different numbers in the hope that you will be lucky enough to hear a human voice confirm the answer to your question. I want my question answered now, and I want a real person to jump to my attention whenever I want it! And heaven help us if we have to wait in a line for ten minutes. We lose sight of

how quick a ten-minute line is for many people in the world who wait a couple of hours to buy a loaf of bread.

So when followers of Jesus expect instant peace and transformation when they become followers of Jesus, they are in for a rude awakening. Today's gospel lesson is very difficult to understand. If you have been reading the Gospel of Luke, you have heard that promises of peace are central to the presence of Jesus. You have heard Old Zechariah preaching in chapter one of Luke about how the birth of John and then Jesus are the work of God "to guide our feet into the way of peace." You have heard the angels on the night of the birth of Jesus sing, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!" You have seen a trembling and haunted woman healed by Jesus with the words, "Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace." In other words, all indications are that the ministry and the presence of Jesus Christ bring peace.

So it is a horrible jolt to come to the words of Jesus in today's lesson: "Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division!" This is a hard and unexpected message! No wonder most Christians like to run right past it, and find something a little more upbeat. I've never seen this section of Luke quoted on a plaque in anybody's kitchen. When I ask family members before a funeral, "Are there any favorite Scriptures that I should use to celebrate the life of your loved one," not a one has ever said, "Oh, please use the one about Jesus dividing up people against each other."

So instead of being jolted by the message of these verses, disciples that are both ancient and modern tend to ignore these things as sort of a strange moment in the ministry of Jesus. You see, disciples both ancient and modern are eager for instant peace, and a trouble-free fulfillment of the promised salvation that Jesus brings. We want Jesus to magically form a bubble over us, so that the cares and pressures and demands of the world can't bother us. We want Jesus to turn our eyes away from all those nasty and negative moments of life.

But today's words from Jesus are jolting because they make it plain that there is no peace without conflict, there is no salvation without rejection. Even the most valued relationships on earth, those of close family members, may be jeopardized by the presence of Jesus in one's life. The promise of peace comes at a high price. Jesus will face the high cost of peace in Jerusalem, upon a cross, and so disciples cannot realistically expect to have peace of mind, heart, and soul come to them instantly and easily.

Instead of being seen as signs of defeat, however, rejection and conflict are part of the divine plan. When a person changes direction in life, everyone around that person is going to be taken by surprise, in one way or another. Whenever change is authentic and lasting, that kind of change will bring the rub of conflict. It does not mean that God has abandoned a person.

When an alcoholic is in recovery, the old friendships and family ties that made the alcoholism seem to be an okay thing are often in jeopardy. Those good drinking buddies may not be able to handle a relationship with a clean and sober member of the circle. Part of recovery, unfortunately, may be to move on to new friends and new ways to socialize. It can be painful, but it is necessary when real transformation and healing come to a struggling and recovering person. In a similar manner, Jesus may turn a person around in such a way that the peace of Jesus may bring division and uproar.

No doubt Jesus saw some disappointed faces in the crowd when he said these harsh words. So then he goes on to call them to sit up and take notice and “interpret the present time”! In other words, Jesus is saying, “Folks, you weren’t born yesterday. You know how to read the weather. When you see clouds, you know it’s going to rain. When you feel the hot wind off the southern deserts, you know things are going to dry up. You need to pay attention to other signs and indicators, and you can’t ignore them, even if it causes you rejection and upheaval. You can’t just drift along through life in a fog created out of a false and flimsy faith. You need to deal with things.”

Debra Dean Murphy writes (Teaching That Transforms: Worship as the Heart of Christian Education, Brazos Press, 2004, p. 23) with criticism about how much current and contemporary Christian worship “dumbs down” the faith and fits dramatic claims of Jesus into our narrow consumer world view. She sees this dumbing down in...

*“...The market driven character of much of our worship; the dumbing down of the church’s historic liturgy; the thoughtless capitulation by Christians to consumer capitalism;...the view of the church as a promoter of ‘family values’ and defender of (abstract) principles of love, justice, and freedom; the facile identification of Christianity and nationalism; the failure to train the imaginations of the young; the devolving of rigorous Christian discourse into pious sentimentality; and the growing trend across Christian traditions toward a vacuous, generic, benign pop spirituality.”*

Things like the apparent failure of a cross just don’t play well in society. These things aren’t going to sell stuff or glitter with success. So nowadays it is too tempting for the Church to ignore the nitty gritty of the world. It is tempting for Christians to ignore the signs of our own times, and pretend that they just aren’t there. It is tempting to make religion all about me, and all about my happiness, my success, my rightness, my need for peace and prosperity and smiles. And yes, Jesus wants to bring us peace, but not at the expense of bringing peace to all of God’s people. Jesus calls us to follow him, even if that means placing everything you value on the line. Jesus says, “I know you are smart enough to see what is happening in the world. Now, go forth and bring the love and justice of God to that world.”

You know, the first lesson from Isaiah speaks so poetically of God providing so many things for the success of Israel, and then how He expected them to bear His fruit to the world. And the fruit God expected was to be justice and righteousness. But that is not what came of all God’s efforts with Israel. Instead of justice, there was bloodshed!

Instead of righteousness, there was a cry of suffering! So God isn't going to pay the rent for that kind of behavior! No way!

Just so, we are now to bring the justice and righteousness of God to our world. That is the expectation, that is the call. We have been blessed in so very, very many ways. But right now, we live in a country that is obsessed with winning an unwinnable war. Our treasuries that have been vast and well-earned are being plundered and emptied into battles and bloodshed. And this is while the infrastructure of our great nation is crumbling! Schools, medical support, education, research, roads, environmental rebuilding, farm support,...all these things are crumbling away, and our people are already suffering the results! Remember Katrina and its aftermath? We've still not recovered from that.

And we don't want to hear about the Hitler-like genocide that is happening in Darfur or Gaza. We might lose some political leverage with the occupying governments of those areas. So when God looks for justice in those places, there is bloodshed. When God expects us to bring righteousness to those areas when we have the ability to do so, there is only a cry from those whose lives mean nothing to their governments. But you know, those things are so depressing. They can really be hard to hear. So when Jesus asks us why we didn't work for the love and justice of God in such places, and we say, "Well, I really didn't know anything about it," don't be surprised when Jesus says, "You weren't born yesterday. You know clouds bring rain, and hot winds bring drought. Why didn't you read the signs of your times?"

Then look ahead in Luke's Gospel to the time when Jesus arrives at Jerusalem. Do you remember what he does? He weeps. He weeps, and he says, "If you, even you, had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace! ...You did not recognize the time of your visitation from God."

They wanted their faith to bring peace and triumph in some quick and easy way, and that's just not the way it always happens. Just like me demanding instant refreshment from a tea bag and not being able to get it, some things may happen in slow and even frustrating ways. But that doesn't mean that the peace of Christ is not coming. It is. Just maybe not in our timing or our manner. Most of all, don't give up on the faith when things get complicated. And even more importantly, don't hack down the faith to something impotent but manageable. The world doesn't need that. The world needs real faith, and it needs people willing to stand up like Jesus to the powers of evil. And friends, that is why you are here. God needs you now more than ever. And you aren't alone. Remember, Jesus says, "I am with you always, even to the end of the age." Amen.