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# Of Swords and Splinters

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A Sermon By  
Ms. Jean Cotting

October 28, 2018  
The Twenty-Third Sunday after Pentecost  
Grace Episcopal Church  
Silver Spring, Maryland

*An audio version of this sermon may be found on the Grace Church website at  
<http://graceepiscopalchurch.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/2018-10-28-JC.mp3>.*

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Matthew 10: 32-42

When I first started composing sermons, my good friend Fr. Robert Hill back in Ohio gave me the advice that whenever he encountered a text with an eye towards preaching it, the first question he would ask himself is, “What about this reading really makes me angry?”

Today’s gospel reading makes me angry. Jesus is making me angry. What do you mean that you did not come into the world to bring peace? Does not that contradict just about everything else in the gospel message? And what is all this about turning on our family members? Does not the commandment tell us to honor our mother and father, and to love each other and to turn the other cheek? Should not that start with the people closest to us such as our immediate family? Does not the Great Commission instruct us to “love one another as I have loved you?” Jesus, you told us in your sermon on the mount that whatsoever we do to the least of your people, that we do unto you. Doesn’t my family count? Why would you want to turn us against each other? That makes no sense. At first glance Jesus seems to be contradicting himself. He’s sort of like a toxic boss or two from my past who would frequently issue orders and then get upset because you did exactly what he or she told you to do. You just want to scream at them and say – “Look, will you just tell me what you want!”

Well, in defense of Jesus I don’t really think that he is telling us not to love our families. I think the message that is behind this gospel reading is that God comes first. God has to come first. I think that what is under fire here is not loving your family but rather turning our relationships into false idols. What Jesus is trying to do is to order our relationships in their correct priority.

In our efforts to understand this transcendent being that is God, we use metaphors like Father or Son. Through the ages there have been a number of traditions and theologians who have used metaphors such as mother or lover. In the early centuries the legend of the mother pelican tearing open her breast to feed her young in times of famine was a metaphor for Christ’s sacrifice. Luther and other theologians have pointed to marriage as a metaphor for Christ’s relationship to the church. Metaphors are wonderful things; they help us break off little bite sized nibbles of a divine being that we will never be able to take in whole. However, there is a danger with them and the danger is this: They lead us into a way of thinking that God is like something else. God is not like anything else. God is God and we have it backwards. God is not like a mother. Mothers are like God. God is not like a father. Fathers are like God. The love, joy, and sheer happiness that we get out of our relationships with one another are but mere echoes of the ultimate source of love: God. To the extent that we are able to love, nurture, teach, care for, and bless one another on a daily basis merely by being present, those abilities and characteristics come from God. God is the source of all those things and so therefore God must come first.

I have an uncle by marriage that I do not like to think about. From a very young age, I just didn’t like this guy. He was loud, arrogant, and obnoxious. He had opinions on everything – especially things that were a) really none of his business, or b) subjects he knew nothing about. When I was a teenager, I was able to come up with excuses to be away and absence myself from his presence. But as a little kid I did not have that luxury. Uncle Bombast was a loud mouthed jerk but his worst characteristic of all was that he was a misanthrope. He would rail against any group of which he was not a member. He was sexist, anti-Semite, probably a homophobe - although back in the day we didn’t talk much about that – and above all the man was a racist. The racism was definitely the most pronounced aspect of his bigotry. And he wasn’t one of those covert behind-closed-door sort of racist. He was all up in everybody’s face about it. Five minutes into any family visit and he was off and running his mouth about this group and that group, and how they were to blame for what was wrong in the world. When I think back to these visits though, the most upsetting thing to me was not Uncle Bombast’s racist tirades but rather it was my parents’ silence. See, I grew up in the suburbs north of Boston and so racism and racists were a frequent topic of discussion. It was literally unfolding in our backyard. When the court

order to desegregate the schools was handed down, we could see the smoke from the riots off in the distance from our front porch. I knew all about racism by age six. It got talked about in classroom and it got talked about at the family dinner table. And I knew from these discussions that neither of my parents were racists, so I found this all horribly confusing. I could not for the life of me figure out why parents would sit there a nod and smile at this repulsive slug of a person spewing the gross ignorant utterances when I knew they didn't agree with him. But the strangest thing of all was that for some reason – and I can't put my finger exactly on why or where it came from – I knew not to ask why. I knew that this was not something to be discussed. I knew not to speak out in protest against my uncle and I knew not to expose my parents to his wrath by volunteering their opinion on their behalf. At a young age I had learned from my parental example to cling to the peace, to stay away from the sword. I and my parents like so many white people of both that era and up to and including the present era did not want to face this sword. We wanted (and continue to want) to cling tightly to our familial and community alliances and put those ahead of God.

Our Rite I confession of sin articulates so beautifully the difficulty that I and my family were contending with:

we have followed too much the devices and desires of our  
own hearts,  
we have offended against thy holy laws,  
we have left undone those things which we ought to  
have done,

We have remained silent when we ought to have spoken up. We have smiled and nodded when we ought to have turned away in disgust. We have turned a deaf ear and lived in denial about the racism that exists within our families and communities when we ought to have confronted it. And it hurts – God, it hurts – because the only way I can deal with my own covert racism, my own sins of omission is to indict the behavior of my parents, and this is something that is extremely painful for me to do. My parents are both long gone, but I loved them very, very much and to consider things about them that taint my memory of them is a very painful experience. It hurts. It feels like I'm spitting on their graves.

<sup>34</sup> “Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.

For I have come to set a man against his father,  
and a daughter against her mother,

Racism and anti-Semitism are two of our worst social ills. We do need to confront them – in our communities, in our families, and in ourselves. We need to put God first, we need to put God ahead of family because unless we put God first, our relationships become subject to the decay and rot that our devices and desires of our heart - to be comfortable – will continue to infect them. Or another way of putting is not as a sword but that the Lord came with a scalpel. The power of Christ cuts us away and sets us apart from those warm fuzzy comfortable things that ultimately are not good for us. Or I am reminded of myself at about age eight when I had a really bad splinter in my thumb and I knew it needed to be removed. It hurt a fair amount but it was more sort of a dull nagging soreness. I knew that if I told my mother it would be tweezer and needle time, and that would hurt a whole heck of a lot if only briefly. I managed to hide it from my parents for about a week. By the time my mother discovered it, my thumb was a mess. It was swollen and infected and thoroughly disgusting. I will spare you the details but the removal process was far more painful than it needed to be. The longer we leave God out. The longer we hold onto our hidden covert pain, the bigger mess we make of our lives.

Covert racism, that sin of omission, is still alive and well and thriving within my family. When my siblings and I get together and the topic of Uncle Bombast comes up, the adjectives that get tossed around are “eccentric” and “colorful” and other tepid and cowardly euphemisms. What I want to shout is, “No, the man was racist pig, plain and simple!” But I do not. The lesson of silence learned in childhood remains. And the splinter continues to fester, the infection continues to flourish and poison who we are and who our own children will become. Simply because we do not want to face that the acute pain of the sword that can cut us free, we would rather live with the splinter.

Over the last couple days I have once again found myself in a place entrapped by silence. This is not a silence based on fear that I might offend or cause trouble. It is being at a loss for words. I cannot seem to find the words that express my horror, my despair, and anger over the shooting at the Tree of Life Synagogue that occurred yesterday. I wish I had the grace and eloquence to speak some words of comfort to our Jewish brothers and sisters. A couple of times I have started writing an e-mail to chaplaincy colleagues from this past summer, all of whom are rabbinical students. But I cannot seem to adequately say what I want to say: that I am sorry, that I wish the world were a different place, that I am grieving along with them. Every draft I come up with sounds shallow, glib, insincere. But in these times when we may find ourselves unable to speak, Jesus gives us words of consolation. He tells us that those who welcome a prophet will have the reward of a prophet. Prophets are special people. They speak on behalf of God. More importantly, because they speak on behalf of God, they have the privilege of having been called by God to hear the word of God directly. They are said to be in sympathy with God to such a degree of intimacy that they are able to feel the pain of God when we turn away. I think that there are prophets among us still and if we listen, if we allow for their voices among us and welcome these voices, encourage them, support them, we too will share in the reward of the prophet. The reward of the prophet is to hear and to be able to speak the word. In the reward of the prophet we will hear and speak the words of truth and of love. Thus we will free ourselves from our own silence.

Amen.