

The Great Divide

Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost; Series C

Lk. 12:49-53

The continental divide of North America is the name given to the mountainous divide that separates the watersheds that drain into the Pacific Ocean from those that drain into the Atlantic and Arctic Oceans. Though there are other divides in North America, the Great Divide is the most famous because it follows a line of peaks along the main ranges of the American and Canadian Rocky Mountains at an extremely high elevation. Indeed, some of Colorado's famous 14,000 foot peaks are on this divide.

Jesus came down from heaven as the king ushering the kingdom of God into the world. Through his reigning on earth, he brought healing and forgiveness to fix a broken, sinful creation. He did it in the most unexpected way. He ate with sinners and tax collectors. He taught that the first in his kingdom shall become last. He taught that his reign on earth is reign marked with suffering, pain and rejection which is to be experienced by all his loyal subjects. And then the King of this kingdom died, nailed to his royal throne, as the satisfactory payment to atone for your sins and mine, to mend your broken life and mine.

Through his life, ministry, death, and resurrection Jesus divided the world. He created two giant "watersheds" to which all on each side flows—a life of faith in Jesus Christ and his kingdom and a life of rejection and opposition to the kingdom of God. Jesus is the great divide. Jesus distinguishes between the righteous and the wicked and between the one who serves God and the one who does not serve him (Mal. 3:18).

The writer C.S. Lewis knew this well and so wrote an entire book the topic entitled, *The Great Divorce*. He wrote to adamantly oppose the common tendency to unite Heaven and Hell in some type of marital union, as if there is no distinction, no such thing as Hell; no punishment for the one who doesn't serve God. But we know that the fate of each individual is determined by how Jesus is received. We know that the one who believes in Christ and waits upon the Lord partakes in the rich fruit of a forgiven, blameless life that flows from the blood of Jesus' pierced side. We also know that the one who does not trust in Jesus Christ is not clothed with his forgiveness and blamelessness. This is the truth. This truth will be disclosed at the Last Day when Jesus comes down from heaven once again as all bodies are raised to meet him to receive the final, decisive verdict—innocent for the sake of Jesus Christ or not?

In the Gospel lesson, Jesus discloses for us, with blatant honesty and glaring clarity that his ministry has and will continue to cause division on earth. For, he is the Word of God, the hammer that breaks the rock as Jeremiah tells us (Jer. 23). He is the refiner's fire as the prophet Malachi tells us (Mal. 3:2). He is the Sword of the Spirit that divides the soul and cuts the attitudes of the heart as the writer of Hebrews says (Heb 4:12). Jesus also came to bookend his ministry with baptisms—a watery baptism by which he began his ministry for us and a baptism of suffering and death on the cross by which he would end his ministry on earth to purchase and win forgiveness for us.

The proclamation of the message of the kingdom of God brought division. All we need to do is read a few excerpts from the Gospel of Luke to see this truth. Throughout Jesus' ministry people are either receiving him or rejecting him. A town either receives the message, the messengers and the one who sent them or that town eats the dust of rejection as its punishment for refusing the message of Jesus Christ. Some placed their sicknesses and diseases at the feet of Jesus while others scoffed and mocked. Some knelt and wept at the foot of the cross while others spit on and hailed insults at the King of the Jews. The ministry, life and death of Jesus Christ still brings division. He is the great divide that separates two watersheds to which all on each side flows—a life of faith or a life of rejection and opposition.

And you have experienced all too painfully the truth that Jesus divides. The dividing message of the truth of Jesus Christ has likely come into your towns and homes. The message of Jesus Christ has perhaps divided your homes. In 1994, a 70-year-old woman donated \$2,400 to her church. As a result, her very own son filed in court to be her legal guardian claiming

that she was “financially irresponsible.” Meanwhile the woman’s older sisters spent of \$3,000 for PSL (permanent seat license) and season tickets to the ST. Louis Rams football games. The same family thought that was okay. When the message of the Gospel is received, it does things inside of people. It takes over and bears fruit. It causes them to do things that others do not simply understand. The opposite is true when that Gospel is absent from someone’s life. The Gospel divides and all feel its effects.

The message of Jesus Christ also brings peace. Granted, Jesus says, “I have come not to bring peace but division” (vs. 51). This is because Jesus has come first and foremost to bring the truth of God *to the world*. This truth inevitably divides because the world is not seeking the truth of God. Too often the world and our culture seeks human desires, and feelings first and foremost. But all people feel the divisive effects of the Gospel. Not everyone has or will experience the peace of God that surpasses all human understanding. Jesus is the prince of peace (Lk. 1:79; 2:14) and the peace of God. His ministry and death, the shedding of his blood, makes peace with God so that you and I would have peace with God (Col. 1:20) and a Spirit of life and peace to live within us (Ro. 8:6).

Many are quick to claim that religion and Christianity is *only* the source of division, hatred, and racism. Many will go to great lengths to prove that the Gospel of Jesus Christ is incapable of bring peace. They will bring up the example of the crusades and will blame the Holocaust on Martin Luther and the work of the Reformation. They will direct our attention to the “hate ministry” of Fred Phelps and the Westboro Baptist Church in Topeka, Kansas to show that hatred is the only fruit that can come from the Gospel of Jesus Christ. And their connection of hatred and brutality to Christianity would all be true if the acts of the crusades, the holocaust, and Fred Phelps were consistent with the message of Jesus Christ. But the fire that Jesus spreads upon the earth, prior to the Last Day, is not the fire of hatred but the fire of the Spirit of God.

The proclamation of the Gospel brings Pentecost near to us. On that Pentecost Day tongues of fire, tongues of the Holy Spirit were brought down to earth and rested upon the Church and its disciples (Acts 2). That Day marked the day that Jesus’ baptism of suffering and death became your baptism of life through the water and the Spirit of God (Ro. 6). The Son of God was divided against the Heavenly Father on the great divide of the Cross of Calvary on that Good Friday outside the city gates of the Holy City. On that Day he cried a cry of abandonment, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me” (Mt 27:46)? Because of this event and this division between Father and Son, you and I are no longer divided against our Heavenly Father. You and I are forgiven children and raised to new, eternal life in the Household of God, the Father. You and I are now sons and daughters of peace and sons and daughters of the fire of God’s Spirit. We live as children of mercy in a divided world because that is what God has shown to us. *We know the joy amid the suffering*. With his Spirit we live with great joy amid the division, rejection and hostility. Only by the strength of his Spirit are we able to wait upon him *faithfully* unto the Last Day.

Take comfort in something else as well. On the Last Day when Jesus will come again to gather up his faithful followers, this tension of peace and division will cease. Denominational divisions, household divisions, racial divisions, and Gospel divisions will end. *Only* the peace of the sinless, blameless, and guiltless life will guard our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Though, this also means that the other truth will hold firm as well. *After all, there are two watersheds created by the great divide, Jesus Christ*. It is a sad truth that those who reject the Gospel of Christ will arrive at destination determined by their rejection, separation from God. This means that as the followers of Jesus Christ we ought to have a sense of unrest for those who don’t know or are divided against the Gospel. We long for them to know the peace that we know. Let us find more and more ways in our homes, in our communities, and as a congregation to share the Gospel and spread the peace of Christ. Let us live *now* in this tension of peace and division by God’s grace. It is both, all the time—division, yet peace, comfort, yet unrest. Help us O’ Lord. Amen.