

The Essence of a Good Story
Luke 12:49-56
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There are some people whose very presence makes us irritated. The woman who is smoking in the no-smoking section of the restaurant. The guy who shouts “get in the hole” as soon as a golfer hits a tee shot on a par five. The guy in an orange vest who offers to extort money from you, I mean...who offers to watch your car while you are doing your shopping. The person who is so perfectly polite, has an answer for everything, and has a permanent smile affixed to her face. There are just some people who put us on edge and make us want to, I don't know, tackle them and stuff a sock in their mouths. Do you know the people I mean? Like Paris Hilton, or Lindsay Lohan? There are many such people in the world whose very presence on earth makes us irritated. Are you one of them? I certainly hope not.

“Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division,” Jesus says. “From now on five in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three.” I have come to be irritating, annoying, grating, galling, infuriating, cloying, a pest of the highest order. I have come to make you as uncomfortable as I possibly can, to make you squirm in your skin, to make you question everything you were taught, all you believe, your very existence. And I'm going to do it all in the name of all that is holy, all that is righteous, all that is graceful. My very presence will irritate you, and I'll be pleased

when it happens, because then I will know that you have met the divine in terms you can understand, and have looked yourself in the mirror and become so disgusted with what you see that you either repent, rejoice, and join me, or tackle me and stuff a sock in my mouth. There are few such people in the world whose very presence on earth makes us irritated. Are you one of them? I certainly hope so.

Of course, Jesus' words predicting division come as something of a shock to our ears, even if they shouldn't, considering everything else he's said. Perhaps we should blame it on our hymns like *Fairest Lord Jesus*, *I've Got Peace Like a River*, and even *Jesus Loves Me* for painting a portrait of a meek and mild, non-violent Jesus, who although still an offensive stumbling block, comes off rather as a victim than as a perpetrator. Yes, Jesus was persecuted, but our first reaction to that persecution is that it was undeserved, that he simply went about his business preaching the Kingdom's values and in so doing attracted the unwanted attention of the powers-that-be. It seems strange to think of Jesus as a stealthy countercultural provocateur, as God's subversive agent sowing seeds of strife even as he is talking about the seeds sown in different kinds of soils. Clearly, the kind of persecution and suffering Jesus endured were undeserved, in the physical sense – no one deserves to be tortured – but he is not as innocent as he seems when we envision him sitting around a campfire with his disciples sharing the keys to the kingdom. Don't get me wrong; Jesus preached non-violence, he preached peace, he

preached the radical inclusion of the dispossessed. But he didn't preach all that in a bubble, in the safety of an adoring crowd behind safely closed doors; he preached it in places like the marketplace, the synagogue, and the Temple steps, with all ears listening, and not holding back on any topic, precisely to stir things up.

One of the things I learned from Francis Xavier Walter, my tenth grade English teacher, was that every good story – every *good* story mind you – comes down to a clash of some kind, a clash between man and himself, man and another man, or man and machine. Of course, there are variations of the theme -- man versus multiple personalities, man versus government bureaucracy, man versus evil mutant bent on destruction of the planet -- but in the end, it is hard to have a decent story without some kind of conflict. Perhaps there are good stories that do not feature conflict, but who remembers them? *Moby Dick*? Conflict. *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*? Conflict. *The Princess Bride*? Conflict. *The Iliad* and the *Odyssey*? Conflict. *The Gospel of Luke*? Conflict. Yes, any *good* story you can think of has a conflict of some kind at its core, iron sharpening iron, a mountain to climb, a demon to conquer. Whether this is only true in literature, and not necessarily in real life remains to be determined, a question Jesus brings to us tonight in the form of his conversation with his disciples about the purpose of his presence with them.

For the better part of the preceding chapters, Jesus has been teaching both his disciples, and anyone who will listen, about what comes with the package of

discipleship. Among the highlights are being dragged before the authorities, storing up treasures in the right place, and selling possessions and giving alms. All of these challenge the lifestyle of those who would follow, and suggest a confrontation with their own needs and desires, the demands of the world, and those with the power to make their lives difficult. In tonight's passage, he sharpens the point directly to the disciples, making it clear that the kingdom lifestyle to which he is calling them is more profoundly conflictual than it appears, even to the point of disrupting their most cherished institutions and relationships. It is all well and good to follow a rabbi you like, but would you do so, he is asking, would you do so even if it meant a rupture in your family, the source of your life and livelihood? This is not suburbia, where kids are encouraged to fly the nest. This is the crux of their economic and social life, being cast out from which means an existence dramatically different than what they could imagine. Indeed, he introduces his challenge by referring to his own coming conflicts and suffering: "I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what stress I am under until it is completed" and makes it clear they are very likely headed for the same fate, if they are faithful. As Father Daniel Berrigan has said, "If you want to follow Jesus, you'd better look good on wood." He's giving them yet one more chance to back out, to avoid division, to avoid conflict, but also to avoid the kingdom.

That there will be costs and consequences to their following him is just part of the story however. What they also must know is that they too are called to bring

fire and to bring division and conflict. Although Jesus' description of his division-causing ministry does not specifically include a call to do likewise, it is clear from the context of the conversation that the division doesn't begin and end with just Jesus. It will be their ministry as well. Their lives will be a struggle against themselves, against others, against the machine. He is calling them to write a good story with their lives, to not simply read a good story but to be a good story, one that brings God's needed fire to the world, that causes division, that makes people uncomfortable, to be a presence that irritates people so much they just want to tackle you and stuff a sock down your throat. You see, the division that Jesus brings is not division for division's sake, but division for decision's sake. The division comes when some choose righteousness and others don't, when some choose to lay aside violence and others don't, when three members of the family decide to sell possessions and give alms, and two members of the family don't, when two practice mercy by bandaging a wounded man even on the Sabbath and three object. Jesus' division is your decision, and he has come precisely to bring it, and he expects us to practice it as well, even if that means running afoul of our family, our friends, our employers, or our culture.

It was certainly true in Jesus' own life that his story was a good story for the conflict it contained. Will it be true in ours too? Every life tells a story. Will our lives simply be stories, or will they be good stories? When the story of our life is told, will its hearers shrug and say, "That's a nice story," or will they smile broadly

and say, “Now, that was a good story.” It is not to raise some saints over and above those of others to ask which stories of our contemporary brothers and sisters in Christ captivate our imagination the most, and why. But there is a reason we more readily recall the names, and celebrate the lives of, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Martin Luther King, Jr., Desmond Tutu, Archbishop Romero, Nicky Cruz, Ronald Villalobos. It’s not because they were somehow holier than the rest of us, but rather that when the time came, they did not avoid the decision Christ’s division brought them, nor the division their witness brought them when their lives demanded of others a decision for the kingdom. Have you made any drug dealers angry this week? Or child predators? Or military defense contractors? Or simply rude people in your office?

Some might protest that Jesus has both created and resolved the world’s conflict in his own life and death, and therefore that we can just concentrate on the peace part. Just as Jesus suffered, they reason, so that we do not have to suffer, Jesus has done the agitating so that we do not need to agitate. Not only have our sins been vicariously atoned for through the blood of Christ, but so too by proxy, has our conflict with the world be taken care of by Jesus. In the cosmic sense that is true; Christ is the only real victor in the battle against evil and death. But let us remember that we are not called to win the conflicts we begin, but to begin the conflicts that Christ wins. You see, our witness of faith and righteousness is not to win people to our own cause, but the Kingdom’s, and it is for Christ, not us, that

each person must decide. It may be difficult to imagine yourself as a stealthy countercultural provocateur, as God's subversive agent sowing seeds of strife even as you talk about seeds sown in different kinds of soils, but that is what you are called to be. You are called to be just as irritating, annoying, grating, galling, infuriating, and cloying as Jesus, a pest of the highest order. You are called to make those who practice evil and abuse as uncomfortable as you possibly can, to make them squirm in their skin, to make them question everything they were taught, all they believe, their very existence. And you are called to do it all in the name of all that is holy, all that is righteous, all that is graceful. Your very presence will irritate those who practice evil, and you should be pleased when it happens, because then you will know that they have met the divine in terms they can understand, and have looked themselves in the mirror and become so disgusted with what they see that they either repent, rejoice, and join you, or tackle you and stuff a sock in your mouth. There are few such people in the world whose very presence on earth makes evil irritated. Are you one of them? I certainly hope so.

Amen.