

It has been challenging to create a response to this Gospel reading. On its surface, it could be read and I feel it is often read as Jesus stating that he is this great divider between believers and nonbelievers, even within families. And this is described as a cost of following Jesus. This should not be taken lightly and deserves much thought within the Christian life. I have often heard it taught that we shouldn't be surprised when our beliefs come into conflict with the world's beliefs. I came to faith as a college student in a conservative evangelical setting, where this cost would be taught as a way of contrasting the excesses of college partying or finding identity in academic success. I happily accepted this idea, at the expense of my GPA. Don't get me wrong, the culture of partying or of finding self worth in academic success are things that can and often are detrimental to our views of our soul.

But I also found that taking this approach in thinking and believing led to the creation of an insular subculture, one that would see someone as in or out. And I am sympathetic to those who are in systems that have these views. As humans, we have a natural desire to have a tribe, a community that creates a sense of safety around us. But in Christendom, there is a tendency for this tribalism to lead to more malicious ideas, creating an "other" of those who didn't fit in with the dominant culture or subscribe to the same belief system. This belief and ideal unfortunately consisted a large part of my early Christian experience, which after years of questioning and wrestling with God, His grace and mercy has peeled these scales away from me.

Paired with this passage's sibling reading in the Gospel of Matthew, we see Jesus claim that he has not come to bring peace, but a sword. Fire, sword, division. There appears to be a significant othering at hand, that could serve a self-centered view of scripture. But, I am reminded that so much of Jesus' teaching is not so much focused on ourselves in the individual sense, but is about the coming Kingdom of God, the Kingdom where the first will be last, where the widow, the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame are uplifted and brought to the great banquet table of God.

And yet, I can't help but notice a scourge in the current times where those who proclaim Christ would proclaim this self serving interpretation of the Gospel and create an other, create a binary of those who are in and those who are out. Of those who belong and those who should go, who must go, who will be forced to go. We are not unfamiliar with those who, using the name of Christ, would lift themselves up and neglect and *other* entire people groups.

How do we stand against this tide of Christian nationalism and stand for the Kingdom of God? That Kingdom that we believe turns this world's social, economic, and power structures completely upside down? This is where I think the division that Jesus is talking about comes into play. We are divided and set apart as believers yes, but we are set apart for a purpose. Even amidst the messy connotation that claiming to be a Christian may bring about in our modern society, I read Jesus calling us to be set apart for the purpose of reflecting who He is to the world, not just as individuals but as a community.

We can also look to our passage from Hebrews, which is part of a longer portion of that letter, often referred to as the Hall of Faith, reminding God's people of their heroes, their leaders, their martyrs, who persevered in God's calling for them, by faith.

I wonder who we each might consider of in our own personal hall of faith, to remind us of the need to persist and persevere. I think of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German theologian who by faith, resisted the Nazis, stood against a nationalistic perversion of Christianity, to the point of death.

Three days ago was the episcopal feast day of Jonathan Daniels, the episcopal seminarian who, by faith, stood with black civil rights leaders, and was murdered defending Ruby Sales in Alabama in 1965.

We don't need to only look to martyrs of the faith for inspiration. In the same Hebrews passage, we see that, by faith, God's people passed through the Red Sea and by faith, God's people marched around the walls of Jericho before the walls fell. By faith, a community can accomplish great and mighty things for God's kingdom. As a community, as a people, by faith, we can stand together for what God is calling us into. I think of the work our community does at our Open Table ministry, serving hot meals to those who need them, or the work that our community does for our growing children's population. These are not the big dramatic stories of crashing walls and crossing split seas while being chased by an army in the dead of night. Rather they are the quiet, often slow and patient processes through which we, by faith, pursue bringing God's Kingdom and our world closer together.

These redwood trees, this forest, is a community. It is a community that does what God calls it to do, just by being. It gives us air, it gives us shade, it provides a sacred space, and reflects the glory of God and his Creation. This all comes at a cost. The cost of being tread upon or the cost of refining fire that cleanses but does not destroy the interlinked roots of this community. The community persists, quietly in its kingdom work.

Like Asaph in our Psalm today, may we continue to call on God to save the weak and the orphan, defend the humble and needy, rescue the lowly and deliver them from the power of the wicked. May we be transformed by that same prayer and commit ourselves to justice that reflects God's Kingdom and persist, like this forest around us. May we be present in *this* present time. Let us not make peace with oppression, but divide ourselves from it with Christ.