

Jesus Divides, August 17, 2025

I don't know about you all, but right now, with the state of the world around us, I've had just about all the division I can handle. Right now, when every social media comment section is a harsh and personal battleground, no matter how innocent the original statement was, I'm about done. Right now when masked agents roam our streets pointing fingers at "them" as the cause of all problems, I think we're all full up on division. Right now, when the example from the highest office in the nation is to wildly cast blame every single time introspection, or self-analysis or a simple apology might be required, I think I am at my division limit.

This week is a week in which I'd much rather be talking about the unity we saw unfold organically, that our youth just described, even while marching up several hills on hikes to nowhere, or fighting the famous bugs of Woodbury. I'd much rather be describing the power of holding hands with people you just barely met and jumping off a raft in the middle of a muddy pond, as a sign for what we all need more of in this world.

Unfortunately, or maybe fortunately, I can't do that without addressing what's right here in front of us. This week, the Prince of Peace himself, the light of the world we all await, who shows us unconditional love and teaches us how to pray said it right here in plain text. I bring division to this Earth.

I will confess. Seeing this at first gave me pause enough to question my own faith, question my own path, and while questioning is good, turning our back on God is always the wrong answer. Jesus is teaching us exactly the opposite. Dig in. Let me give you an example.

Two Tuesdays ago, I attended the Vermont Principal's Association annual conference, to celebrate with my former co-principal and good friend, as she was recognized as Vermont's elementary principal of the year. Along the way, I ran into some former colleagues, who asked me what school I was at now. I filled them in on my life trajectory, that I was no longer a school leader. That I had unexpectedly but wonderfully followed a call to ministry, serving my local church which has reflected so much of God's love toward me, while I went back to seminary this fall. The response (and to fill our guests in, Vermont is the second-most non-religious state in the nation) felt something along the lines of "oh, that's...um...great. Well, my grandfather's uncle's cousin's friend was Catholic, so I get you. Mad respect. Now, if you'll excuse me, I need to do absolutely anything other than continue this conversation, so...good seeing you Dave, and good luck to you.

Did proclaiming my faith just lead to division?

That interaction was already heavy on my mind when Marilla and I sailed on Lake Champlain from Colchester to Burlington last weekend. It's not far at all, but takes at least four hours under sail with good winds, and it felt like a world of difference. Our version of vacation was docking at the community boathouse, paying someone else a bunch of money to sleep on our own boat, tied up to their dock, and experiencing a town we knew well from a different direction, without a car.

Ahoy there! Came the friendly call from the boat next door. Now, when you're me, a true introvert doing the job of an extrovert, combined with my New Jersey upbringings, the internal monologue response to a cheery "Ahoy there" on a 95 degree day is something along the lines of "go...away". I'm grateful God has taught me better, though, and blessed me with a filter between here (head) and here (mouth) because by

responding in an equally friendly way, we met some truly amazing people.

Docked beside us by pure chance were retired professors from Ohio, who had a little bit of time on their hands, along with a sailboat. Their granddaughter was due to be born in New York City this month, so they planned their summer around sailing their boat from Lake Erie to Vermont, traveling through two canals and ending up in Burlington, where they would be able to live on their boat, and walk a block to the Amtrak train when the time came. It turned out she was born the day we left, so recognizing that even though we had traveled a whole day by water to get there, it still was just Burlington, so after we got the boat secure in its home, we drove the 15 minutes back to send them on their way with a parting gift, to bless the arrival of Madeline Popp into this world.

We had a great time getting to know them, and talked a lot about education, until the same question came up...you say you used to be a school leader..what are you doing now?

I paused. I almost said “still a principal, things are going great”, but instead, I told the truth. At that moment, I better understood who I was talking to. I was talking to Lynn Powell, the author of our first reading today. Her response was nothing short of transformational.

“That is so good to hear”, she said. “I grew up in East Tennessee”, she said, “in a very fundamentalist, very conservative church. When I came to realize my church was using the name of God to oppress my mind, and my body, I lost my church, and some members of my family.”

“I will tell you, though,” she said, looking right into my eyes, “I never, not for one second, lost my God. I never lost my faith.”

Powell's career as a poet, author and educator turns out to be deeply rooted in bringing the truth of the Gospel down to Earth, through a beautifully unapologetic feminist, body positive lens. She is the Our Whole Lives sexuality and healthy relationship philosophy in the form of a poet. My life is enriched through my conversation with her, and that door was opened through proclaiming faith, not in spite of it.

Politics divides families. Violence divides families. Addiction divides families. Mistrust and abuse divides families. Does Jesus divide us? Thanks be to God, he does.

Look at it this way. If we were complicit in all that tears us apart, this world would be an even darker place. If we went along with all that tears us apart, the world would be even darker. I have come to bring fire on this Earth, and how I wish it was already kindled, Jesus tells us. That fire is the fire of resistance. That fire is the fire of standing up for what is right, for no other reason than because God told us it's right, because God placed a spark in our hearts and on our minds, and we refuse to put it out. Because that fire is not already kindled, because oppression, hate and injustice still exist in this world, we are called to bring that fire forth, even when doing so divides, instead of unites. When we refuse to be pressured into something we are not comfortable doing, we throw another stick on that fire. When we rise out of addiction and say "this is not my way", we throw another stick on the fire. When we refuse an unjust order, and say "I will not oppress my brothers and sisters on this planet", we throw another stick on Jesus' fire. When we see our friends making bad choices, and we say "not me, not today", we throw another stick on that fire.

And friends, make no mistake, it will divide. Those who use division and fear as their only tool of control to further an unjust world, they're

going to dig in hard, because that's all they've got. So, thank God we're not acting like them. Thank God Jesus brings division to the Earth, because our power to resist evil is our power to stand strong. Even, and especially when evil doesn't like it much. Did we really think following the path of Christ was going to be easy? Sometimes it feels like standing at the base of a hill you just climbed twice, got told to come back down from, and then were told you're going back up again. Take that climb. Trust that when you find the right people on the right path, hold hands, and jump into murky, muddy unknown waters, you will always come up for air with a smile on your face.

Trust in the truth. I have a baptism to undergo, Jesus tells us. Don't forget for a second that when Jesus was baptized, God's voice came down from heaven, clear as day: *This my son, the beloved, with whom I am so well pleased. Matthew 3:17.*

When we walk with true faith in the beloved of our God, in the beloved of all that is, then the division of humanity will always give way to the peace of Christ.

True peace doesn't come easy, friends. Thanks be to God that seeking it makes us stronger.