

“The Peace That Divides”

Scripture: Matthew 10:34-39; Luke 12:49-53; Hebrews 4:12,13; Revelation 19:11-16

Txt: Isaiah 9:6,7; Matthew 10:34

And his name shall be called the Prince of Peace...But think not that he has come to send peace. He came not to send peace, but a sword and fire. He has come to divide.

You would think that the world already is divided enough. There are generations gaps, credibility gaps, and cultural gaps.

Divisions split the world and nation. The New Left and the Right, North and South, Blacks and Whites, rich and poor, hawks and doves, battle it out nightly while Huntley and Brinkley or Walter Conkrite referee.

There are many people who believe that the world is already well-divided. Everything is clear cut and settled. Some magazines supposedly publish the “Plan Truth” and others promise to give the “true, untold story.”

They kind of remind me of Batman or Chicken-man. Chicken-man is a mild mannered shoe salesman whose real name is Benton Harbor. But on the weekends, when he is free from the shoe store, he puts on his chicken-man uniform and become the fearless white weekend warrior who strikes fear into the hearts of those involved in the world-wide web of wickedness.

For Batman and Chicken-Man good and evil are already well-divided. Their job is merely to fight for the good and destroy the evil.

This is what makes these programs so ridiculous. The writers know that things are just not that simple. Chicken-Man is always forgetting the secret password or jumping out of buildings without his wings.

Yet, we would like so much for things to be well-divided and sorted out. I’m sure that is the reason for the ever popular interest in fairy tales by people of all ages.

In fairy tales the elves and dwarves are always beautiful and good without the slightest inclination toward evil. They may be deceived but they cannot be made to sin. The dragon, witch, or ogre is always ugly and grotesque. Nobody ever feels sorry when they are killed.

J.R.R. Tolkien captures the essence of fairy tales in his book entitled The Hobbit. Hobbits are little creatures about four feet tall, with round tummies, colorful clothing, and choir-boy countenances. They are peaceful and happy, but hate adventure or change of any kind.

But their world called Middle-Earth came under the curse of Mordor, a wicked magician. The curse produced dragons, ogres, and trolls. But the worst curse of all was a magic ring.

The person who wore that ring became invisible. However, whenever he wore it he came more and more under the power of Mordor, the Magician.

The Hobbits, elves, and dwarves joined forces to destroy the power of the ring. We follow them through misty forests, over and inside cavernous mountains, and through dismal swamplands. They battle incredible odds to climb the top of a volcano named Mount Doom. There they cast the magic ring into the heart of the volcano where it is destroyed.

A great light breaks forth and the world comes alive with laughter and singing. The curse is broken and peace descends upon Middle-Earth. The trolls and giants, ogres, and dragons wither and die, and Mordor is banished forever from Middle-Earth.

We close the book with a sigh. If only our world were so well-divided between right and wrong, beauty and ugliness. We're a little sad that our world is so mixed up.

Unhappily, for most of us, the problems that we face every day are not as well-divided as we would like them to be. Answers to our problems do not come in blacks and whites.

Rather we live in a world of grays, where good and evil are mixed up. In the fairy tales we could fight along-side the elves and dwarves against the dragons. But where we live the elves and dragons fight together inside of us.

Christ promised that there would be division in the home. But the divisions in our homes are not always black and white as we would like them to be.

It's not so easy for us to say "I'm on God's side and you're on the side of the devil." The division is more often between "my way" and "your way" rather than between right and wrong.

And if we are not careful we start seeing things in black and white where there are only shades of gray. We would like to think that when a son or daughter disagrees with our opinions of the war that they are traitors or deceived. But it may be that we are deceived.

It's very easy to look with disgust at a so called hippie—to turn him into a fairy tale dragon and slay him in our anger. But it may be that behind that faced of beads, hair and laziness that they have something valuable to tell us, that we don't want to hear, about the dangers of material possessions and the vanity of putting money into pockets full of holes and water into broken cisterns.

The world is really not that well-divided at all when we look at it closely. Rather, it's a confusing place to have to grown up in.

The right answers many times are on the lips of wrong attitudes. Correct beliefs may be held by unloving and unconcerned people.

The opinion which we hold so dearly; the right we have fought so hard to protect; the actions which we so valiantly defend may be wrong.

The faith that we are just about to throw out; the answer that we reject; the action that we so vocally condemn may be right.

The home is not the only place where there is confusion rather than division between right and wrong. There is also confusion among people as to what they should or can believe. For them, the problem is not so much doing the truth, but first dividing it from untruth.

One person I have talked with expressed doubt concerning the Resurrection of Christ. Yet, she felt guilty that the question ever arose. She has been trying to fit this belief into a world that seems so devoid of anything supernatural.

Questions too deep for me to answer continually come up in Sunday School. “Did God really divide the Red Sea?” “If He did, why doesn’t He do something spectacular now-a-days so it would be a little easier to believe in Him?”

“If Jesus loved people so much why did He talk so much about Hell?” “How can a loving God send someone to Hell who has never heard of Him?”

All the imagery of war and conflict seen in the Scripture this morning takes on new meaning for one who is seriously struggling to answer these questions; who is trying to divide the truth from falsehood.

Life becomes a battlefield. Sometimes we are not quite sure who is fighting and even less sure whose side we should be on. It times like these it is easy to have our faith destroyed in the cross-fire between truth and falsehood.

But our scripture text does not promise easy answers. Christ does not promise to deliver us from the conflict or from the dark night of the soul.

I think we do a great disservice to young people when we try to sow seeds of doubt, or confusion in their minds. However, I think we do a greater disservice if we give them cheap and easy answers to valuable and difficult questions.

I can remember when I expressed my confusion in high school. I was warned by some in my church not to ask such questions unless I wanted to incur the wrath of God. Somehow they believed if you just shut your eyes the problems would disappear.

I was searching for a faith I could honestly believe in and give my life to. But I was told my questions betrayed my lack of faith in God. They told me to trust and obey, but they didn't seem to realize that that was precisely where the problem lay.

Was I to trust something I honestly believed to be untrue? Was I to obey what to me seemed plainly wrong? Such attitudes give rise to a faith which Mark Twain described as “believing something you just know ain't true.”

Many times the counsel we receive when we are in doubt is reminiscent of the good advice of Elihu, Bildad, Eliphaz, and Zophar, the friends of Job. Their counsel did little to divide and separate order from the chaos and suffering of Job's life. Rather, their answers added fear and guilt to his confusion.

Not only was he faced with the inescapable question of his suffering, he was told that he must suffer and face the questions apart from God—in the deep darkness of God's absence.

And out of the deep darkness of our ambiguity and confusion, whether it be in the home or in the heart, there shines a great light. For we have the sure word of Christ that God himself is at work in all the confusion, conflict and doubt that we might have.

It is God in Christ working in our lives to drive the truth from falsehood, the evil from the good, and love and beauty from hate and ugliness.

The confusion and conflict within us is a sharp two-edged sword “piercing to the division of soul and spirit, of joints and marrow.”

All the scripture passages read this morning were filled with the imagery of war and conflict. Isaiah lived in a day of doubt and confusion. The rod of the Assyrian Empire beat heavily upon the Kingdom of Judah.

As we read Isaiah's words with imagination we can almost hear the boots of the Assyrian soldiers marching into battle. We can almost see the blood-stained garments and the destruction left in the wake of burning cities.

In a time when the Kingdom of Judah was being ruined with sword, fire and confusion Isaiah is still able to speak words of hope.

Out of the deep darkness of national disaster that severely strained the faith of those who believed that Mount Zion was the throne of the Jehovah, Isaiah could still see God working.

He looked for the day when the rod of the oppressor would be broken by one called the Prince of Peace. When he comes "every boot of tramping warrior...every blood-stained garment will be burned as fuel for the fire." The Prince of Peace will divide his people from the Assyrian enemy and establish peace and justice.

We who are not as patient as Isaiah would rather do the dividing ourselves. But it is Christ who divides. Remember the parable of the weeds in the Gospel of Matthew?

A man sowed good seed in his field. But one night, when everyone was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and went away. When the plants grew and the head of grain began to form, then the weeds showed up.

His servants came and offered to go and pull up the weeds. But he would not allow them because he was afraid that they would pull up the wheat along with the weeds. "Let the wheat and weeds both grow together until the harvest, then I will divide them" he said.

The danger that confronts us is the danger of doing the dividing ourselves. But, as I mentioned before, the basis of our division is not between right and wrong as often as it is between “My way” and “the wrong way.”

The danger is that we equate “our side” with God’s side, so that every division that occurs in the home or in the world confirms us in our belief that God is on our side.

Bob Dylan has a song to that effect. He sings, “Oh my name it ain’t nothing, my age it means less/ The country I come from is called the Midwest/I’se taught and brought up their laws to abide/ And that the land that I live in, had God on its side.”

But Christ does not take sides—He divides. Christ said “I came with a sword and with fire.” But John Calvin stole that fire and burned Michael Servetus at the stake.

The words of Pascal are forever confirmed in blood that he who plays God ends up acting like the Devil.

It is Christ who divides. The Prince of Peace comes, now as always, with fire in his eyes, wearing a blood-stained robe, and wielding a sharp two-edged sword from which not even our thoughts are able to escape.

He has promised never to leave us at peace with the false divisions that we have made. He has sworn never to leave us satisfied with half-truths and easy answers.

We have his sure word that no matter how confused the night or dark the road he is working through it all until the day his word divides forever the darkness from eternal light. And of the increase of that peace there shall be no end. Amen.