

To all who are beloved of God at Bethlehem Lutheran Church, called as saints, grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Jesus did not want the twelve to be unprepared when confessing Him caused strife in their lives. Do not think that I have come to bring peace, but a sword. The issue is Jesus Himself! He gives peace with God! Objective Peace – Outside of ourselves peace! Peace that the world cannot give! Peace that passes human understanding! Peace that God angels proclaimed on this earth the night of His birth! That is why He came in the flesh. That is why He went to the cross. But not all receive His blood-bought peace. Rejection of Him and His words will cause conflict for Christ’s church. Setting Him aside to keep outward calm is counterfeit peace – like Jeremiah laid at the feet of the positive speaking but false prophet Hananiah. Even as their voices outside of us and on the inside that sinfully destroy peace, so there are voices outside of us and on the inside that say “peace, peace when there is no peace”.

Even more unsettling is Jesus forewarning that such conflict over Him extends also to families. A person’s enemies will be those of his own household. Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. Following Jesus will not always lead to outward happiness and family togetherness.

Make no mistake, such togetherness is what Jesus desires. He gave the gift of marriage wherein two become one flesh. He intends the love of a husband for a wife to be as His own love for the church. He has commanded children to love their parents and honor them in all things and promised to bless them therein. He seeks to bring His love to others through His gift of family.

But the default setting of our sinful nature is to make idols of ourselves and other people and other things. Satan is so slick at exploiting those flaws. Like he used Eve to tempt Adam and like he led Adam to fail in his duty to Eve, so he seeks to use those closest to us. Jesus therefore warns us against making idols of family members.

Since the 1600’s, there has been a phrase regarding families that “blood is thicker than water.” It is a proverb that indicates that family relationships have a special claim on us. It indicates that one can normally expect more kindness and support from family than from strangers. Water soon evaporates and leaves no mark behind. Not so with blood! Like the blood that marked the doorposts in the first Passover, it has staying power.

In many instances of need this attitude in families is good and right and true. Jesus once chastised the Pharisees for neglecting the care of parents. Jesus marked that view as sinful. In real, vocational ways, “blood is thicker than water.”

However, this attitude that “blood is thicker than water” can also be misused to excuse sin. Outward harmony in the family can be so valued that it outweighs speaking the truth in love and acting on that truth. Earthly affections can be so strong that they obstruct loving someone in Christ. After all, we all want to protect our loved ones from pain and struggle. Sometimes that desire tempts us to exempt them from carrying the cross Christ calls them to or to omit calling them to repentance. Sometimes that desire is directed inward, exempting us from carrying the cross Christ calls us to. Whoever does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.

The First Commandment surely looms large here. As St. Paul wrote, to the church at Rome, the very commandment that promised life proves death to us. Whom do you fear more, a family member’s displeasure or God’s wrath against their sin and yours? Whom do you love more, your own blood or God who sacrificed His blood for you and for them. The temptation to cave-in to family pressures and to put God’s Word at a distance is always with us. It is heightened even more in our decaying culture and in the chaos and statistical sainthood of pop Christianity so prevalent today.

We are not to nag others, but our old Adam can transform “not nagging” into total silence and implied acceptance of known sin. We cannot argue people into repentance or into the kingdom of God but our Old Adam easily transforms “not arguing” into not bearing witness with patience and gentleness. Accommodating the rejection of God’s revealed will may temporarily ease tensions (let’s just get along at all costs), but it has effects that are unloving and destructive of God’s gift of eternal peace.

Jesus in effect says here to the twelve that “water is thicker than blood”, the water of baptism that is. Those baptized in that washing of rebirth have a mark from God that goes beyond any earthly tie. To relieve temporary pain and struggle within family by removing the cross Christ calls you to bear is robbing family members of the love Christ would give to them through you.

Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. The word for bring in the Greek can be translated as “cast” or “throw out”. It is a bold picture, a sudden hurling of the sword where peace is expected. It calls to mind King Saul hurling his spear at David as David sang peaceful psalms to him.

Jesus hurls His sword not at you or your loved ones, but at sin, death and the devil, even as Satan sings his soothing, slaying lullabies. Jesus will not let the world be united in its cursed and condemned lot! He causes division because He must divide us from our natural state and the judgment we merit. The Word made flesh is a man of war, who wields an awesome sword. “The Word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged

sword, piercing as far as the division of souls and spirit of both joints and marrow and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart” (Heb. 4:12).

Jesus knew the pain of the sword that He came to hurl on this troubled earth. Remember an earlier day in Jesus’ ministry when His own family was divided against Him. They thought He had lost His senses and wanted to take Him away from teaching the multitudes (Mark 3:20-21). Remember also that on the cross that sword struck His own person a death blow, because He had become sin for us.

Jesus knew the pain of family division, for on the cross He had enemies in the very household of God. Our sin set the Father against the Son in a division that is most commonly called hell. He was crushed for our iniquities. He bore your full punishment, temporal and eternal. From His pierced side came forth both blood and water that is thicker than your sin and the sin of your family members and of me and mine. It removes the foul rebellious mark of our transgressions and leaves only the mark of Christ’s righteousness.

Risen from the grave Jesus is still about that loving, dividing work. By His grace, you are members of a new family, the very household of God. He comes to banquet you today with His family meal, setting the table with heavenly food, forgiveness food, healing food, strengthening food. He doesn’t want you to love your earthly family less. He wants us to love our dear ones in Him so that they might enjoy fellowship with Jesus, now and forever.

As you do so, opposition will come, just as Christ faced opposition. Like Jesus’ earthly family thought He had lost his senses, so spouses or children or parents or close friends may view you from time to time or you may view them from time to time. For too zealous commitment to weekly worship and daily prayer; for too generous support of Christ’s church in a rough economy; for too steady concern for and caring communication of God’s Word in this post-modern age.

As opposition came to Jesus, so it came to St. Paul who had little outward peace. Jeremiah was an emotional wreck we call the weeping prophet. You know what happened to Peter and the twelve. As with the twelve, so Jesus does not want us to be unprepared when confessing Him brings strife in our lives.

Thank God he has not left us unprepared in answering for our failings in this regard. Every sin of loving parent, spouse, child, friend or self more than God, He has divided from us as far as the east is from the west. Every sin of being silent when we should speak, every sin of compromise to preserve surface concord, He has divided from us as far as the east is from the west. Thank God He came to bring such division. Thank God there is freeing, joyful reason to sing of His steadfast love forever and make known His faithfulness to all generations. In the Name of Jesus. Amen.