

Disturbing the Peace
A Pentecost 12 Sermon
Luke 12:49-53
Sunday, August 19, 2007
by Dr. Frank Trotter

I got a laugh this week out of an article I read in the online edition of *The Onion*. If you aren't familiar with *The Onion*, it's a terrific satirical "newspaper" that takes on every prominent issue and personality of the day.

This week the following fictional news release appeared about a man in Denver who has decided to announce to the world that he has found his true love: "Husband and father of three Hank Glass, 37, told reporters Monday that his life finally has a purpose now that he has met that special someone else, 42-year-old waitress Debra Nelson. 'There was a point where I thought I'd never fill this empty void, and that I'd be all alone with my wife and children forever,' said Glass, who claimed that he and Nelson first crossed paths at the most unlikely time: during his son's birthday dinner. 'I knew right then and there that she was the other woman for me.'"¹

We can laugh at this fictional interview about the dysfunctional nature of family life, but there's a sense in which it seems as true as truth does these days. For example...

During a campaign stop on Thursday in New Hampshire, presidential hopeful Rudy Giuliani was approached by a woman in the crowd who asked him why Republican voters should support him if his own children were not doing so. Giuliani responded by saying, "I love my family very, very much and will do anything for them. There are complexities in every family in America. The best thing I can say is...leave my family alone, just like I'll leave your family alone."² Whether or not his son who has chosen not to campaign for him or his daughter who has indicated support for Barack Obama will be left alone seems highly doubtful in today's political climate.

At a campaign stop in Chicago on Wednesday, Michelle Obama, wife of the Democratic candidate, said she "hoped her husband serves as a role model in

¹ "Area Man Meets That Someone Else," *The Onion*, August 15, 2007, <http://www.theonion.com/content/node/65187>.

² Tom Brune, "'Leave family alone,' Giuliani tells questioner," *Los Angeles Times*, Friday, August 17, 2007, A26.

how he helps raise their two young daughters.”³ Then she went on to say, in what appeared to many to be a thinly-veiled swipe at her husband’s main rival for the nomination, Hillary Clinton, “If you can’t run your own house, you certainly can’t run the White House.”⁴

Former Massachusetts governor Mitt Romney found himself tip-toeing through the tricky sands of family dynamics when he was asked on a recent campaign stop in Iowa about ten days ago why none of his five sons were serving in the military in Iraq. Romney said, “One of the ways my sons are showing support for our nation is helping to get me elected.”⁵ After his remarks drew criticism from several groups whose children or family members are serving in Iraq, Romney was forced to admit that he misspoke in seeming to imply that serving in Iraq and serving on his campaign committee were comparable in terms of service to the country.

Families, it would appear – with all of their foibles and idiosyncrasies – are fair game in today’s politics. But lest it be suggested that this is something new, have a listen to what Jesus says to us in the twelfth chapter of Luke:

I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled. I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what stress I am under until it is completed! Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division! From now on, five in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three; they will be divided: father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. (Luke 12:49-53)

Dr. Teresa Berger, a member of the faculty at Duke Divinity School, argues that it is Jesus who disturbs the peace in this passage by challenging our notions of authority, power, and tradition. She argues that Jesus intentionally sets out to “become a source of conflict and opposition when he lays claim to startling forms of authority and power. His words are marked with a sense of apocalyptic urgency and anguished intensity... Contradicting the angels’ promise of peace on earth at his birth, [he]

³ “Obama’s Wife Decries Blackness Question,” article appears on CBS: Politics, Monday, August 13, 2007, <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2007/08/12/ap/politics/main3160121.shtml>.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Michael Luo, “Political Memo: Question of Sons’ Choices Dogs Romney Campaign,” *New York Times*, Wednesday, August 15, 2007, <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/08/15/us/politics/15romney.html>.

emphatically denies that he's come to bring peace... [And, Berger points out], he illustrates this claim by defying traditional systems of meaning and cohesion, especially familial and intergenerational ties (and this in a cultural context in which kinship defined life). How can this be good news?"⁶

Berger's analysis is based on the belief that Jesus confronted then, and confronts now, a world not of goodness and beauty but of shallowness, corruption, and profound selfishness – a world where all of the traditional sources of power and authority are invested in keeping things just the way they are. Dr. Berger says, "If [it is true that] ...our world is deeply marred and scarred, death-dealing for many life forms, with systems of meaning that are exploitative and unsustainable, then redemption can come only when those systems are shattered and consumed by fire. Life cannot (re-) emerge without confrontation. This is the basis of the conflict Jesus envisions. He comes not to disturb a nice world but to shatter the disturbing and death-dealing systems of meaning that stifle life."⁷

Dr. Alan Culpepper in his analysis of this text notes a provocative saying of Jesus attributed to him in the *Gospel of Thomas* but not included in the New Testament canon: "Whoever is near me is near fire; whoever is distant from me is distant from the kingdom" (*Gospel of Thomas* 82)."⁸ Although the verse is not in our Bible, Culpepper suggests that it is almost assuredly consistent with the main themes of Jesus' message in the Christian scriptures. He says, "[Jesus'] announcement of the kingdom would not bring peace – at least not immediately [...but] division and conflict. Those who commit themselves to Jesus must prepare for the opposition they will face, sometimes even from their own families. Houses, families, and generations will be divided against one another... Wherever the Word of God has been heard, division has occurred among the people who have heard it..."⁹

⁶ Teresa Berger, "Disturbing the Peace," *The Christian Century*, August 10, 2004, p. 18, reprinted at "Religion on Line," <http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=3116>. Dr. Berger is a member of the faculty at Duke Divinity School in Durham, North Carolina. For more information, go to <http://www.dukenews.duke.edu/2003/09/berger0903.html>. With appreciation and apologies, I am "borrowing" the title of her article as the title for my sermon.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ R. Alan Culpepper, "The Gospel of Luke: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections," *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. IX (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 266. Dr. Culpepper is the Dean of the School of Theology at Mercer University in Atlanta, Georgia.

⁹ Ibid., 267.

You are I are familiar with Jesus as comforter and healer. We know the stories of how he invites the children to come to him. We are moved to tears when we read the stories that he is the Lamb of God. But what in God's name do we do with these occasional passages that jump out us where Jesus is holding a match to the establishment – sometimes for purification and sometimes for destruction?

Our church is filled with gorgeous stained glass windows of Jesus in the temple with the elders, of Jesus as comforter, as Jesus as the Resurrected Christ. But when was the last time you saw a stained glass window in a church that portrays Jesus as provocateur, as the un-ettler of the establishment, as disturber of the peace?

Dr. Culpepper says, “Jesus warned that those who make a commitment to him will be persecuted, that a commitment of faith also means that our attitude toward material possessions must change, and that moral responsibilities must be taken with even greater seriousness. Now Jesus warns that persons who make a commitment to him will find their relationships to others, even those closes to them, affected by that commitment. We cannot make a commitment to Jesus Christ as Lord without its affecting the way we relate to friends and to family members. Because our commitment to Christ shapes our values, priorities, goals, and behavior, it also forces us to change old patterns of life, and these changes may precipitate crises in significant relationships. Some of the most unexpected crises we face come from the opposition of others when we set out to do what we perceive to be the good, moral, and right thing to do. Jesus himself knew how devastating such crises can be, and he warned his followers to be prepared to encounter them also.”¹⁰

As a contemporary example of what a disturber of the peace might look like, Teresa Berger talks about a woman named Lisa Fithian whom she describes as a “grassroots activist in the global peace-oriented movement for social justice,” a woman who has repeatedly been arrested for “intentionally creating crises, i.e., situations that force the powers that are – transnational corporations, the media, security forces, consumers – to cease doing business as usual, examine the inequities that they may be perpetuating, and change policies. In an interview last year, Fithian explained: ‘When people

¹⁰ Ibid.

ask me, “What do you do?,” I say I create crisis, because crisis is that edge where change is possible.”¹¹

Dr. Berger says, “I wonder: Is this not what Jesus meant when he spoke of bringing fire to the earth? Did he not seek to bring crisis as ‘that edge where change is possible’? Was he not saying, as Lisa Fithian says, I have come to bring crisis because business as usual means injustice and death?”¹²

I was reading a fascinating article in this past Friday’s *Los Angeles Times* about an extremely controversial show that will be appearing on CBS this fall entitled “Kid Nation.” What would happen, the creators of the show wondered, if we “sent 40 children, ages 8 to 15, to a former ghost town in New Mexico to build a society from scratch [?].”¹³ The controversy has come because of the show’s use of children and whether or not the children’s participation in strenuous activities of sometimes 14 hours a day on the show violates child labor laws. But the provocative part of the show sets out to wonder what would happen if these children “with no access to their parents, not only by telephone, ...set up their own government, laws and society in front of reality television cameras.”¹⁴

A poll appearing on AOL yesterday said that 62% of those polled would never let their children appear on such a reality show that that 46% of those polled would never consider tuning in to watch “Kid Nation.”¹⁵

Well, it doesn’t take a rocket scientist to know why that’s true? What family among us would want one of our children to grow up to think that radically outside the box? Build a new society from scratch? “Well, what if they came up with a society where I’m not in charge or where my kids come up with values that are different than mine?” “What if one of my kids becomes a disturber of the peace? I’m not going to let them participate in something like that and nobody in my house is going to watch it!”

C. S. Lewis, the well-known twentieth century English author, once noted, “Many do not believe that either trumpets ‘with melodious noise’ or the

¹¹ Berger, “Disturbing the Peace,” Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ “Is child exploitation legal in ‘Kid Nation’?,” *Los Angeles Times*, Friday, August 17, 2007, E1.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ America on Line, Saturday, August 18, 2007,

<http://news.aol.com/entertainment/television/story/ar/ a/kid-nation-reality-tv-abuse/20070818125009990001>.

infernally await is where the road ends. But most, I fancy, have discovered that to be born is to be exposed to delights and miseries greater than imagination could have anticipated; that the choice of ways at any cross-road may be more important than we think; and that short cuts may lead to very nasty places.”¹⁶

This week I will be spending a few days with some of our teenagers at our annual Youth Camp at Camp Sky Meadows. And I wondered the other day what might happen if our church camp became if not “Kid Nation,” then perhaps “Kid Church”! What would happen, do you think, if our kids were isolated from parents and family, from all outside means of communication for 40 days, to come up with a church from scratch?

Gosh, Debbie, Bob and I might not have a job after they’re finished! They might rearrange the furniture, you know! (And perhaps more than just the furniture!) They might decide that some of our rules are ridiculous don’t conform with their understanding of God’s love. They might come up with brand new definitions for ‘family,’ ‘justice,’ ‘faith,’ and ‘discipleship’ that require that we think in new ways if we would keep a sense of church intact amidst such turbulence.

When we go to bed tonight and say our prayers, “Now I lay me down to sleep...,” perhaps all of us ought to also offer words that are just a little more disturbing to our normal routines:

Jesus, as I lay me down to sleep tonight, don’t let my sleep be restful if I stay the very same. Don’t let my sleep be calm if I wake up no different than I am right now.

Jesus, if it is true that you bring division and fire, if it is true that our commitment to you will reorder everything about our lives, let me be different when I wake up tomorrow.

O Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, be merciful to be a sinner. Disturb me and wake me up.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

¹⁶ C. S. Lewis, excerpt from “The Vision of John Bunyan,” from *Selected Literary Essays*, 1962, printed in *Inklings 1981* (New York: Cahill & Company, 1980) – a calendar “inspired by the writings of C. S. Lewis and those who inspired him”; also found at “The Window in the Garden Wall: A C. S. Lewis Blog,” Monday, January 24, 2005, http://yourdailyclslewis.blogspot.com/2005_01_01_archive.html.