

Grace to you and peace from God the Father, and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

The night sky was cloudless and filled with stars. Shepherds watched their flocks, while they huddled around a campfire. Suddenly, they were surrounded by a multitude of angels. They were told not to fear because the angels were bringing them good news. A savior was born who would bring peace to earth. Yes, that was Christmas.

But now Jesus is on the way to the cross and his words are a stark contrast to the angels' words. He tells his disciples that he has come to bring fire on the earth, and not peace but division. The disciples were caught by surprise, as we are. Though Jesus' words surprise us, they, when combined with the angelic proclamation, accurately describe both the work of the cross and the condition of the world.

The cross of Christ brings peace. Jesus died for the forgiveness of our sins. There is no longer any barrier between God and humankind. We are now able to begin a new life and a new relationship with God because of what Jesus accomplished.

Barriers between people are broken down because of the cross of Christ. Paul writes that there is no longer the divisions of male/female, slave/free, Jew/Gentile. All are one in Christ. At the same time, faith in Jesus Christ brings division. This was certainly true in the early church. Christians were separated from their families and from their communities because of their Christian faith. Discord caused by the cross of Christ continued throughout the history of the church and it continues today.

Throughout history wars have been fought in the name of religion, though most often it is a mixture of both religion and politics. We had the Crusades with the Christians versus the Muslims. There was the Thirty Years War with Catholics and the Protestants; and again in Northern Ireland. There is the Jewish/Muslim conflict in Israel and Palestine. Now there is also conflict with almost all religions against Islamic fundamentalism.

There is also a strong history of Christian fighting Christian.

--Did you know that fist fights broke out among the Christian bishops in the First Council of Nicaea in year 325 as a position was literally pounded out on the humanity and divinity of Jesus?

--Germany lost 30% of its population during the Thirty Years War between Protestants and Catholics.

--In the early 20th century Lutheran Churches were ripped apart by a dispute over predestination—a doctrine that makes us yawn in this day and age.

--Christians struggled with civil rights, and the conflict over abortion still rages.

--Our newest conflicts revolve around gay rights and global warming, and politics.

The controversy, conflict, and division are never ending—even in families. Consider this story of a typical family. The family sat around the dinner table one evening and a discussion was started. Ruth, in high school, began the conversation by

telling of a friend at school. Her friend had told her that Jesus was the son of God and that salvation was free to all who would trust in Him. Ruth quoted her friend as saying, “Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life.” Immediately an argument started. Tom, an older brother said, “I don’t want any of that church stuff at supper.” The father agreed. There was a fellow at work who was always trying to “corner someone on religion”. He did not want any of that nonsense in the house.

Mother raised her voice saying, “A little religion would do all of them a lot of good. The least they could do would be to get a Bible and check it out.” She had a Bible that had been given to her as a child. She would help Ruth look it up after supper. Little Bill, the youngest of the family, suggested that they ought to go to church and ask the preacher. He would know. After supper Mother, Ruth, and little Bill gathered around the kitchen table with the Bible to look for some answers. After reading for a while, they decided they would go to church the following Sunday and talk to the Pastor. The father and the older son left the supper table in a “huff” to watch the football game.

The three did attend church the following Sunday. They did talk with the Pastor and in time they came to experience the love of Christ in their lives. They did find that Jesus was the way, the truth, and the life for them. These three became regular attenders in church. The other two? –They’re still watching TV.

There is a cutting edge for a person who has experienced the love of Christ in their lives. That cutting edge may mean that indeed families can be divided as in our story. That cutting edge may mean that you might be ridiculed for your faith, that cutting edge may mean that you might stand apart and alone for the convictions you hold, that cutting edge may dictate how you will live your life, how you will treat others, and how they will treat you.

In his words that are recorded in Luke, Jesus gives us a hint at how we, as Christians are to live in the middle of conflict. Jesus focuses his words on the family. This sacred institution is not to be held above God. Loyalty to God comes first. This priority will cause division in families. In families, hopefully, division is bridged by love. We may not agree with each other, but we do love each other. But we are also challenged to love other people even when we violently disagree with them. As Jesus instructed his followers, “Love your enemies and pray for them.

As Christians, we are challenged to love each other even when we disagree with them theologically. We are still brothers and sisters in Christ. Christianity has long been not just acceptable but almost expected in North America. Even in what many call a post-Christian era, going to church is acceptable. This isn’t true in all lands, of course, and we would do well to remember—and pray for—Those Christians in various parts of the world for whom the confession of Jesus brings division, strife, and danger.

But all of this brings up a question that may be worth pursuing: Is the relative case of the Christian life in this land entirely the result of cultural acceptance or is it

because we fail to live into the gospel Jesus announced? Throughout Luke's account, Jesus announced a new community—he calls it the kingdom of God—that is governed not by power, but by equity, where wealth is shared rather than hoarded, and where the weak and lonely are honored.

What might our personal and congregational lives look like if we took Jesus words more seriously at home, work, school, and in our communities? What fears, pressures, and stresses distract us from embracing the kingdom life Jesus both describes and demands? This isn't to suggest that we have intentionally shirked our responsibilities. No, the pressures and stresses we feel are real. We have families to care for, jobs to tend, responsibilities to all manner of people and organizations. But we also live in a culture that equates wealth with character, that elevates consumption to an art form, and that teaches us to look out for our own well-being above that of all others.

So what might encourage us in leading the kind of life that Jesus modeled? Maybe realizing that at times we will be caught up in strife and division and turmoil. But also realizing that living for Christ will lead to a deeper dense of peace and a holy engagement where we are caught up in the abundant life which comes from following our Lord. Jesus calls us to live passionate lives of integrity—to believe and to believe strongly—allowing our faith to mold and shape our lives. We are called to respect others. But we cannot expect to live without conflicts and challenges. The love and peace of God will get us through the difficult times.

Above all, we called to be faithful—to love others in word and deed whether they are our friends or enemies. And the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus. Amen.