

“Do you think that I have come to establish peace on the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division.” To imagine Jesus as a source of division contradicts the popular image of the gentle Christ who shepherds lost sheep and advocates turning the other cheek.

I’ve always struggled with these readings. In a way, I actually fear them. I celebrated Mass for our teachers and school staff on Tuesday and with them all gathered together I was amazed at how many people are employed in our parish school. As a pastor I was amazed that we are able to pay so many people mostly from what you so generously contribute to the offertory every week. Do I want to cause division in this faith community and give people reason to have second thoughts about their generosity by saying something offensive about their candidate in this rather crazy political season? I don’t think so. So I keep my mouth shut and hopefully the offertory will remain steady. But that silence tears me up inside because I know I’m not being truly authentic, I know I’m being less than faithful to my vocation.

The Baptism that Jesus talked about in the gospel was the Cross that he would soon face. When my name sake, Jeremiah opened his mouth to clearly speak God’s word to the Israelites, they threw him into a well and left him there to die. No, no it much better to keep one’s mouth shut on the important moral issues of the day. It is much better to give sweet, feel good Hallmark homilies than it is to reflect on what God’s Word has to say to the difficult issues of the day.

The division mentioned in today’s Gospel comes about because Jesus teaches a clear message of love for God and for all others. He reached out; he had compassion; he suffered along with people; he understood their pain; he broke bread with the hungry; he befriended the poor and sinners; he was at ease with the least of these. And while we’ve heard all that so very often, often we don’t really allow it to form us. Instead we continue to love those who love us in return, we continue help those who already have enough and we continue to see our own good in preference to the good of others.

These readings ask us to move beyond a faith that simply makes us feel good. They confront us with what Dietrich Bonhoeffer called “the cost of discipleship.” They ask us to be open to the passion that God’s Spirit places within each one of us, even if it leads to rejection and persecution. For me it is a struggle to be faithful to the Jesus of this gospel because it will mean at times speaking out against the values of the world.

You see, it is not just about getting myself to heaven. It is not just about being concerned with my own spiritual well-being. We are called to be concerned about the spiritual well-being of our world. To be impassioned by the Gospel is to live the values of the Kingdom of God as Jesus did, even if it means causing division; even if it leads to the cross.

What would Jesus say about racism, poverty, the death penalty, killing unborn babies, decent housing and affordable health care for all people, global warming, profits at the cost of living wages, and hostility towards immigrants? Many of us would say, “Well let’s not mix politics and religion.” But the Gospel’s radical call of love touches on each of these issues. Do we look the other way and support the status quo, or do we speak up, vote our conscience, pray about these issues and allow God to speak to our hearts?

In short, do we struggle to live Kingdom values, or do we just want to be comfortable. The real struggle is not out there; it is in here. Will I, will you, allow God’s will to form our attitudes? Will we allow God to touch our hearts and minds?