

“Disturbing the Peace” a sermon based on Hebrews 11:29 – 12:2 and Luke 12:49 – 56 preached by Kerry Enright at Knox Church Dunedin New Zealand on 18 August 2019.

We know the harm division does: setting people against each other, inciting distrust, causing people to question motives, to deepen fear, to create ogres, like-minded people gathering to reinforce each other’s ideas.

At its worst, causing violence, Northern Ireland and South Sudan

And we know how division can affect others as if they have to take sides, for us or against us.

We see it in our own history - Catholic and Protestant, Christian and Muslim.

We know the harm division does.

So it sounds strange to hear Jesus say –

“I came to bring division to the earth, not peace.”

Looking back over our lives, can we remember situations where Jesus might have caused division?

I can think of some.

From the 1960s on, our church’s relationship with the South African Council of Churches divided families in New Zealand over playing sport with South Africa. In families who had gone to rugby together, some family members now stayed home. Husbands, wives, partners, brothers, sisters, children. Indeed in many families, some marched outside rugby grounds while partners or siblings or parents were inside watching the match. Our brothers and sisters in South Africa had asked us to choose for them. At that point, for many people, the views of their family in Christ became more important than the views of their blood family.

Sometimes risking division takes great courage.

At a national church gathering, in the front of hundreds of people, in the midst of a tense debate about sexual identity, a senior respected minister stood up with some of his colleagues, in front of the chair of the meeting and said essentially – I am gay and I don’t want this debate happening without people knowing this affects me and many others. The chair was a friend of his. The minister was asked to sit. He declined. Others sat. And so the debate occurred, with this man standing there, reminding us that decisions we make affect people. A moment of courage calling the church to act with integrity and faithfulness, for the flourishing of all. There was tension, emotion, anguish, terrible sadness, deep division. Afterwards, I went outside and cried.

Such courage carries a cost.

First generation Christians know the cost in terms of relationships.

God’s vision for the flourishing of humankind burned inside Jesus. Jesus was on fire for a new world, a different way of being, a different configuring of power and of relationships. He upended acceptable ways.

And it was personal and interpersonal, here and now, in the choices people made every day. It involved reading the signs of the time. The way of Jesus was so different that it set people at odds with each other, father and son and mother and daughter and mother in law and daughter in law.

People turned towards this new Jewish sect and its radical vision, putting at risk relationships with family who stayed with mainstream Judaism. How hard it must have been – to risk their accepted way, their trusted network, as they took up following this new prophet. They anguished over their choice, as we can sense in the gospel of John with its criticism of those who did not change.

It has happened for every first generation since.

In communities and families where religion itself is strange, converts sense the awkwardness of those around them. Sometimes it comes out in humour or offhand remarks. Choosing faith for the first time affects our closest relationships.

“I have come to bring division”, Jesus said, which means the views of those with whom we were closest will not bind us. We now have another family, a global family formed around Christ.

Once on that path, division doesn't go away.

How long can a follower of Jesus sit silent while a family member makes homophobic comments? As a brother or sister in Christ with a person who is lesbian or gay or bisexual or queer or transsexual or intersex - as if they are sitting in the room when this is being said, how long can we sit silent? Not long. Is it that the longer we sit silent, the more acceptable we are making homophobia and the less safe we are making it for our brothers and sisters. But then we have but seconds to decide what to say and how to say it. What do we say? “When you make comments about homosexuality, I feel uncomfortable. In our church, there are gay people I am close to. I want our family to be a safe place for people to be who they are.”

How long can a follower of Jesus sit silent while a bus passenger makes loud statements about Muslim people when a woman in a hijab sits nearby? Not long. Perhaps we have seconds to decide because the moment passes. In some situations, if it seems unsafe, perhaps the thing to do is to move to sit next to the person who is being abused. In some situations, if it is safe to do so, perhaps to say to the person speaking loudly – I believe this country is for everyone. I want this bus to be safe for everyone.

It's not like we carry on living our life, keeping our head down, and add on Jesus. Being Christian costs. Sometimes it costs relationships.

If not broken relationships certainly strained relationships or awkward relationships or awkward times in relationships.

And it can cost us inside.

As we wonder about whether we could have handled it differently, with greater sensitivity.

Or whether we could have waited and said something when tension was less evident.

But we know that there is a greater cost if nothing is said or done, that generally those without a voice carry the cost of harmony at all costs. What is lost is God's vision for the flourishing of creation and humankind. Calls for harmony at all costs are not to be trusted.

“I have come to bring division”, Jesus said.

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Knox Church
449 George Street
Dunedin
New Zealand
Ph. (03) 477 0229
www.knoxchurch.net

Kerry Enright: 027 467 5542, minister@knoxchurch.net