

Christ Church, Georgetown

The Third Sunday after Pentecost, Sunday, June 25, 2017, 11:15 a.m.

The ReverendSE Timothy Cole

Genesis 21:8-21, Matthew 10:24-39

The Black Barony Hotel is in a Scottish Baronial castle dating from the 16th century. It is set in rather lovely grounds in the Borders of Scotland near a place called Eddlesone. My family used to go there for lunch from time to time when I was a boy.

All that sadly came to an end one day though when I had something of a mishap with a 16th century sundial. My parents were having a nice lunch in the dining room while I was off exploring the grounds and the rather elegant, ornate garden. I have only the dimmest recollection of this, as I was only seven years old, but I was doing something I thought was perfectly sensible with this sundial. I am not sure if I was trying to make it say out the correct time or just to make it say a time I wanted it to be. Anyway, it clearly wasn't very well built because it suddenly fell over! The only bit I really do remember is looking up to the dining room windows and seeing the faces of my parents looking, well, horrified really!

I don't remember anything else, but my father always said that his lasting memory from the whole sorry escapade was driving away from the main house and looking in the rearview mirror at the manager of the hotel standing and shaking his fist at us. Appropriately enough -- and I suppose this only could be the case in a Scottish hotel -- above his head and above the lintel of the doorway was an Inscription. It read, "Prepare to meet thy God." I think I was fairly close to doing so that day!

Families have their good moments and their not so good moments, don't they? I suppose everyone must know something of the world-famous Simpson family. They live just down the road in Springfield, don't they? I suspect that most of us wish, in some respects at least, people would see our families and think of the Simpsons' neighbors, the Flanders family. They are decent, respectable Christian folk. Their life is ordered and industrious. They do things together. They eat together. Their children are well behaved and responsible. They may be a little dull, but that is a small price to pay for being a happy, good living family.

OK, we may not really want to be like the Flanders, but isn't there quite a bit in us that wants other people to think we are like that? In any case, the reality is that our families have a horrible tendency, at least occasionally, to descend into the chaos that routinely engulfs the Simpson family week by week. To look at our Facebooks, of course, you would never think this, but we all know the truth!

Today's readings are hard ones to take. In a world like ours, where religious and political violence is on the rise, where division and conflict, anger and hatred seem to be almost spiraling out of control, today's readings are unsettling.

In today's Gospel Jesus says: "Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and one's foes will be members of one's 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. Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it."

These are chilling words from Jesus, are they not, heard in the context of our world today? Of course, these words have to be taken alongside other words Jesus spoke. He also said

“Blessed are the peacemakers,” and “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.” He prayed to the father “that they (his followers) may be one, even as we (he and the Father) are one.” “And I,” he says, “when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself.” Today’s reading seems all the more shocking because he also said these other things.

So what are we to make of this? “I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.” Not only that, but the first lesson from Genesis is the story of Hagar and Ishmael being cast out from Abraham’s family. Since Ishmael became the forefather of many prominent Arab tribes and is seen as the forebear of Mohammed and the Islamic faith, it represents the account of a family division that has had ramifications that run right down to our own day.

Well, there are huge issues here I think. There is the whole truth and unity dilemma and the question of how Christians should be involved in conflict, both of which could easily be the subject of a 30-lecture series in the Adult Forum: A thousand times too much material for a sermon to deal with. But that is the preacher’s lot: To at least say something. Well, today, I would just offer these three thoughts:

October 17th this year will be the 500th anniversary of Luther nailing his 95 thesis, or complaints, to the doors of the Wittenberg Castle Church. In the end, he and the reformers came to believe that the reforming truths they held were so in opposition to the existing body of faith that the only thing they could do was to break with the existing church and start a new one. This was the second major division in the history of the Christian Church, and since then the Protestant branch of the church has divided and divided and divided again. Every time we disagree, we split. Even the Episcopal Church, which has close to its heart the idea of tolerance of disagreement and diversity of outlook, has itself split within the last twenty years.

Jesus’ words today do tell us that we have to keep in mind that unity, however precious, is not everything, but one does wonder if Christians have too often taken division as the easy way out when the demand of the greater Kingdom was really to stay together and disagree.

The second thing I would say is this. Every family tolerates disagreement because relationship is precious to us. “Blood is thicker than water,” we say. Love is more important than what we think we know about the truth. Like Homer in the Simpsons, what goes on inside our heads is often just nonsense, but our families and those who love us know that we are more than just what we think. After all, as St. Paul says, “Now we see through a glass darkly.” Now our grasp of the truth is so often so limited.

Thankfully, God appears to think that relationship is more important than our ability to know and live the truth, and that is why he sent his son, Jesus, to die in order to reestablish and heal God’s relationship with a broken and sinful world. The cross is witness to God’s desire for unity despite our lack of truth.

And that leads me to the last point I would offer this morning. The basic question for us as Christians is when does disagreement about the truth become so great that unity -- living together in peace -- is no longer possible? In a family, in a church, in a country, in a world, when must we, reluctantly, cease to be peace-makers and place the truth of the Gospel and the following of Jesus over and above the bonds of unity, affection, and family? And, on top of that, when do we have no choice but to take up the sword?

When I was an Army Chaplain we used to do sessions with the new officers on morality and the ethical demands of command and service. Every soldier is required, under military law, to obey any legal order given that soldier by his or her legally appointed superiors, even if that means

their own death or the death of their comrades. But, no soldier can ever be required to obey any illegal order. In the highly complex operations in which our nation's military have been involved in recent times, very tough calls and difficult decisions have come to rest on the shoulders of very young people.

It was instructive in these session to listen to new officers discussing situations where the legal "must" comes up against the ethical "ought." There is what you must do legally, but there is also what you ought to do as a soldier and a human being. The two are nearly always the same, but not always. Every soldier knows to break ranks on something is a very, very serious matter and one that can have life and death consequences for you and the people around you. But they also know that there may come a day when an extreme set of circumstances may mean that they have to consider doing just that. Every Army has incidents where, in retrospect, some should have broken ranks but did not. British military history has its My Lai Massacres as well.

So, how do we decide? How do we balance these two essential aspects of the Kingdom of God, unity and truth? Well, I think the family is as close as we get to where we live the balance out most completely and with the greatest commitment. What we are prepared to do to stay together as a family is probably how far we should go in our churches and our societies.

Blood is thicker than water, and the blood of Christ is thicker than the water of our personal attitudes and opinions. Even if our communities are sometimes more like the chaos of the Simpsons than the ordered peace of the Flanders households, even if our brothers and sisters occasionally break the theological equivalent of ancient and precious sundials in acts of careless experimentation, they are still our family.

As Jesus points out to us today, there is a level of disagreement which even the love of a family cannot tolerate. But every family that fails, every church or society that breaks apart and perhaps even descends into civil war, pushes the kingdom of God further away. It does not bring it nearer.

Christ preaches unity, not at all costs, but at the highest of costs, the cross from which he calls all men and women to himself is how far he is prepared to go. How far are we prepared to go?