

“Signs of the Times” – Stephanie Wing, 8.15.10

The anthem that we just sang is one of my favorites. It was written by Earlene Rentz, who lives in this area, and commissioned for the Danville Children’s Choir, of which Kathy and Carrie Shewmaker were members. We’ve had the song in our music folders for over a year, and the first time we tried to sight read it, we couldn’t even get through the whole thing! It was hardly a prayer of peace then, but now it feels very prayerful.

The words are from a prayer attributed to St. Francis of Assisi. Francis was born in Italy in the late 12th century to a wealthy family that sold cloth. One day he was in the marketplace in the middle of a business transaction when a beggar came up to him and asked for alms. When he was finished with his business, he ran to find the beggar and gave him everything he had in his pockets. His friends teased him and his father was furious, but it was formational for St. Francis. Later in his youth, he enlisted twice in the army for military campaigns. The first time he was captured and spent a year as a prisoner of war. He also suffered from serious illness. All of these experiences began to awaken in him a call to his life of service to God. Francis could not return to the same life of leisure he had known. He shunned his wealthy friends and their frivolous pursuits, and started begging in the market on behalf of the poor. He sold more and more cloth to give the money to

the local church, and his father was not happy. Finally, Francis legally renounced his father, giving up everything for a life of simple poverty.

Nearly twelve centuries before Francis was even a twinkle in his father's eye, Jesus said these words: "They will be divided: father against son, and son against father." These words in our reading from Luke today are not just jarring, they are offensive. Why would Jesus come to divide families? One of the great problems in our society today is the division of families. It seems like there is hardly anyone who isn't affected in some way by division within a family these days. Sometimes division is unavoidable, sometimes even necessary, but even when it is for the best, scars always remain.

Jesus asks, "Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth?" Well, actually, yes, we did think that. After all, isn't Jesus the Prince of Peace? Even just looking in the gospel of Luke, Jesus seems all about peace. John the Baptist's father, the priest Zechariah, prophesied about Jesus that he had come "to guide our feet in the way of peace." (Luke 1:79) The angels sang "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!" (Luke 2:14) Jesus heals, and then sends away those he has healed saying, "Go in peace." When Jesus sent out the seventy to preach in the countryside, he told them to bear a message of peace where ever they went, "and if anyone is there who shares in peace, your peace will rest on that person, but if not, it will return to you." (Luke

10:6) Yes, Jesus, somehow we got the message that you did come to bring peace, so what gives? The gospel of Luke has been going along quite well up to now, really, and suddenly Jesus starts talking about fire and division. Those are the signs of the times.

The fact is, Jesus' very presence stirs things up, from day one! According to the gospel of Matthew, Herod was so threatened by the birth of Jesus, and what it meant for the people, that he had his soldiers kill all babies 2 years old and younger in and around Bethlehem. When Jesus first begins to preach and returns to his hometown, he was nearly killed by his own people. Jesus calls his disciples to drop everything they are doing in order to follow him. James and John even leave their father behind in the boat. He causes a major disruption when he overthrows the money-changers' tables in the temple. Jesus' presence caused such a stir that crowds immediately gathered when people knew where he was. A short tax collector hiked up his fancy pants to climb a tree, just to see Jesus. Everyone greeted him in glory when he rode into Jerusalem on the back of a donkey, and all of the people knew his name as they were shouting for his crucifixion later that week.

Jesus stirs things up, and he does cause division. If we read the gospels, we can't help but see that, clearly. He calls people names, like the "fool" from last

week's reading, and the "hypocrites" from this week's reading. And that's when he's talking to his friends. Jesus calls it like he sees it, plain and simple.

When we really look at Jesus, that also changes the way we look at everything else. Jesus is the light of the world, and Jesus brings a new light that illuminate things in a completely different way. Have you seen the commercial for Clorox bleach, where passers-by are asked to pick out the sock that looks whiter? It's a no-brainer – one is gleaming white, and the other white sock, when put next to the Clorox sock, looks dingy. But if all we have is a drawer full of non-Clorox beached socks, they will all look white. It is only when we have a better, brighter comparison that we can appreciate the dinginess that we have been calling white all along.

Though we might expect that the light of the world would make everything shiny and glowing, Jesus really illuminates things for us to see them for how they really are. He provides the contrast that shows our own dinginess, that shows how far we are collectively from being the kingdom of God, the kingdom that Jesus calls us to be.

The division that Jesus brings happens when we realize how far we and the world around us have fallen short of God's glory. The division happens when we look at the status quo and say, "That's not good enough. We can do better. God

calls us to do better.” The division happens when we look at what our world tells us is valuable – pleasure, gold, and power – and we cry injustice.

We are all called to live prophetically, not according to the rules of our day and age, but according to the rules of the kingdom of Heaven. Jesus calls us to a life that is counter-cultural, and being counter-cultural will sometimes mean that we look like fools in front of our friends and family, as did St. Francis. We live in a world of hatred, injury, doubt, despair, darkness, and sadness, but we are called to sew love, pardon, faith, hope, light, and joy. That is counter-cultural. And it is difficult.

Are we really ready to see things as Christ sees them? Are we ready to see the signs of the times, and to realize that we are the hands and feet of Christ, called into this world where there are so many problems, in order to reach out in love? Are we ready to reach into our pockets to help the beggars in the streets? Are we ready to be divided from one another for the sake of the gospel?

It’s a tall order, and a tough call. And the fact is, though following Christ will divide us from the world, we are also called to unity, and called to work for the healing of divisions. It’s one of the divine paradoxes. The call to division in order to be united is something that is hard to understand – impossible, perhaps – except through the lens of God’s grace.

That is precisely what we experience each time we celebrate communion. This meal, that unites us all as one body, also calls us to be divided from the status quo. It is a meal that remembers that eternal life for us is secured by the death of Jesus Christ. It is a meal that reminds us that the broken body of Christ brings us together. It is a meal that gathers us together, and then sends us out in many different directions, because we are called to mission throughout the world. It is a meal that signifies to us who we are and to whom we belong. It is a meal that gives us a foretaste of that great feast when the kingdom will come, on earth as it is in heaven. In the meal, we taste and are reminded of what God has already accomplished, and what has been accomplished but not yet realized. This meal itself is a paradox.

Do you hunger for righteousness and peace? Then come, and eat. Do you thirst for abundant life? Then come, and drink. The meal gives us a vision of what is to come, and of what God calls us to be. But it also opens our eyes to see the signs of the times, and reminds us that we are called to proclaim the kingdom of God, to be the hands and feet and body of Christ, until the Lord comes again in glory. Come!