

Sermon transcript St Philip Oak Bay

9am Eucharist, 14 August 2022

Celebrant and preacher: Rev. Canon Peter Parker

Colossians 3:1-11 Sermon starts at 35:25

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ThlEKPHlfGo

I speak to you now in the name of God, creator, redeemer, and sustainer. Amen.

Ayaan Hirsi Ali is a Somalian woman. She was raised a Muslim, and she is now an author and teacher in the U.S. When she was six years old her family subjected her to the ritual cutting and sewing up of her genitalia. She suffered a complete loss of rights and respect as a woman. She left home, went to college, became a journalist in Holland, and for the things she has published her life is now under threat from Islamic militants. In her book *Infidel* we read her father's letter to her after she has asked for a divorce from her arranged marriage. He wrote to her, “Dear Deceitful Fox, With reference to your underlined above statement, you do not need me and I do not need you. I just invoke Allah to disgrace you as you disgraced me. This is the last message you will receive from me. Go to hell and the devil be with you.”

I want to tell you about Frida and Austin, a Tamil couple from India. They had immigrated to Canada as teachers. They dedicated their whole teaching careers to sending money back to their home village to put their nieces and nephews and others through college. Frieda told me one day of her conversion, when missionaries had come to her village to tell them of the love of Jesus, and how in Jesus’ love there were no untouchables, that all were equal together. It seemed to her so right, so much better than the caste system, but when she accepted Christ as Lord and was baptized, her family disowned her. It was years before her parents spoke to her again.

I remember another parishioner, an ex-Jehovah's Witness, who had left her abusive husband against the advice of the elders, and left the Witnesses, and had been baptized by the Anglican church. Her daughter chose to stay with her, but her son stayed with his father and the Witnesses. She told me of running into her 14 year old son in a store one day after not seeing him for six months. She said, “Hello, how are you doing?” He closed his mouth, turned his back, and walked away.

According to Luke, Jesus said, “Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division. From now on, five in one household will be divided: three against two and two against three.” Whenever I read this passage, I cringe. Isn't Christianity about bringing us together, establishing unity between people of all stripes, binding us together with the cords of love as a good Christian song says?

The truth is, in many of our own families, though we may stay in touch and strive to show one another the deep love of parent and child, of siblings, of husband and wife, there are nevertheless divisions based on belief. Of our five children and eleven grandchildren, all of whom we love dearly and see fairly often, on a given Sunday morning none of them are in church, and some of them scorn me for being in church. Perhaps some of you might know the heartache that my wife and I feel.

The Old Testament is itself a story of broken unity: didn't God call humanity into a glorious existence in intimacy with the divine? “And it was very good,” he repeats over and over again. The human beings represented in Genesis by Adam and Eve broke that unity by rejecting the first ever covenant with God. Their offspring Cain and Abel set the course with fratricide. The second attempt represented by the story of Noah and the flood soon fell apart. The third attempt from the call of Abraham and the establishment of the covenant fell apart with the selling of Joseph into slavery by his own brothers. The great Exodus story showed that even with the demonstration of God's great power in the escape from Egypt, the water from the rock and manna in the wilderness, even with the Ten Commandments, the people were still unable to live out the unity into which the Divine kept inviting them.

Today's Isaiah reading shows that Yahweh feels like a betrayed lover; that no matter what God has done for God's people, they have spoiled the relationship, and division in the family of God continues, whether it is over traditions or doctrines or who we ordain or marry or consecrate or welcome into the church. Divisions were evident at Lambeth last week. What's underneath all of this division? When Jesus called Satan the father of lies, he was telling us the fundamental root cause of division, the line that is drawn which divides us: it is that line between truth and deception.

The truth of creation is that indeed it is very good. The truth of God the creator is that God is love, and whoever loves is born of God, and knows God. The deception begins when people choose to grasp power over others and over the earth itself instead of yielding themselves to God's love. Our divisions happen when we decide our own ideas and agendas are more important and more worthy than anyone else's. The lie is that I can find life by taking power over you, judging and condemning you. As soon as I do that, I divide myself from you and from the love of God, and it pains all three of us. This separation from one another and from the divine is what we refer to when we use that word *sin*. Division of nations, races, religions, and even of family members one from another, seems to be the norm for humanity, and now we are experiencing the consequences of our deep division from the earth itself, the environment and the. Creatures.

It would be so easy right now to enter into an overwhelming despair. It would be so easy to say, “What's the use?” Well, first of all, I would suggest to you, this world only seems to be getting worse. The fact is that the human conscience is more alert on a global scale than it has ever been. It's only in the last 100 years or so that we have organizations like Greenpeace or Amnesty International or World Vision or our Primates World Relief and Development Fund who are speaking up and acting against our divisions. A hundred years ago, almost no one spoke about the pollution of the oceans or the atmosphere. The Thames in London was a chemical soup, a toxic sewer - but now there are fish in the Thames.

I do not subscribe to the doom and gloom lament that is so commonly backed up by a media machine which is more able and willing than ever before to show us crime, terrorism, war and natural disaster, or even unnatural disaster. Secondly, listen to what Hebrews told us this morning: there have been generations of faithful men and women who have struggled on through the same, or worse, conditions of strife and division as we witness today, without ever seeing them resolved. They lived by their faith in a God who was ultimately in charge. They lived in the hope that one day all will be caught up in the Divine, in a great healed unity. They lived in love in the warmth of God's love for all people. As the writer to the Hebrews points out, they never saw the healing they hoped for.

We go through this life with its joys and pains, its achievements, its tragedies, its pleasures and disappointments in faith - faith which is the assurance of things we hope for, the conviction that we can trust things which we do not yet see. Knowing this, we never lose our courage to speak up for the justice righteousness compassion and love of Christ, even when it can cause division in our families and in our communities, or even sometimes in the church. Jesus after all did not establish a church. Jesus invited us to live out the values of the kingdom of heaven: justice, righteousness, compassion, and that selfless love, that unconditional love, which has the power to overcome all divisions. These are the values that are bringing unity and healing to the human family even now. If we focus on those values, the divisions will fall away, and the labels we use to keep others separate from us will become meaningless. I pray and believe that day is coming closer all the time. Amen.