

In the name of ✠ Jesus.

Today we hear the Prince of Peace proclaim, “*Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth.*” Today we hear Him, who was welcomed by the heavenly host with a song announcing “*on earth peace*” (Luke 2:14), Him who sent out His apostles to the towns and villages to bestow peace upon the homes (Matt. 10:13), say, “*I have not come to bring peace ....*” He, who told Peter, “*Put your sword back into its place,*” lest you die by the sword (Matt. 26:52), here says, I have come to bring “*a sword.*”

What are we to think about Jesus' words today? How do we understand this divine pronouncement? I know that Dr. Voelz frequently tells us (me especially) that we must take seriously the text as written, not going down the easy road that the systematicians lay out for us so as to avoid dealing with difficult texts. I accept that; but we also know that Jesus did, in fact, come to bring peace. He would later tell His disciples: “*Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you*” (John 14:27). Again, “*I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace*” (John 16:33). The Lord through the prophet Isaiah promises that He Himself “*will ordain peace for us*” having “*done for us all our works*” (Isa. 26:12), and St. Paul proclaims that God did it through Jesus: “*God was pleased ... through [Jesus] to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross*” (Col. 1;19-20). Again, “*God was [in Christ] reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them*” (2 Cor. 5:19). Jesus, “*the sunrise from on high,*” came to do this, John the Baptist's father Zechariah proclaimed: “*to guide our feet into the way of peace*” (Luke 1:78-9).

With all of this evidence, therefore, we're surely not understanding Jesus rightly if we think that Jesus is saying that he came not to bring *any* peace at all on earth. There is a bit of tension here, and “interpreters routinely note the tension”, even as early as St. John Chrysostom, Dr Jeff Gibbs reports in his commentary (Gibbs, *Concordia Commentary: Matthew 1:1 – 11:1*, footnote, p. 536). He goes on to suggest that Jesus is here using a rhetorical device called “rhetorical negation,” which would lead one to translate Jesus' words: “Do not think that I came *only* to bring peace on earth; I came *not only* to bring peace, but *even more* a sword” (Gibbs, p. 536).

Context suggests it, too. Remember, these words of Jesus today follow immediately after He had called on believers to confess Him: “*everyone who [confesses] me before men, I also will [confess] before my Father who is in heaven, but whoever denies me before men, I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven*” (Matt. 10:32-33). Ah, yes ... confessing Christ, looking to Him, believing in Him, that brings the peace that Jesus won by His cross. St. Paul says that, too. Writing about our faith in “*Jesus our Lord, who was delivered up for our*

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*trespasses and raised for our justification,*” Paul says, “*Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ*” (Rom. 4:24–5:1).

And yet, Jesus says, I “*came not only to bring peace on earth, but also — even more — to bring a sword,*” not an ordinary sword, but one sharp enough to divide soul and spirit. It’s the sword of the spirit, which is the Word of God (Eph. 6:17). The same “*word of Christ*” by which faith comes to us (Rom. 10:17) is the word by which that faith is measured. It discerns “*the thoughts and intentions of the heart*” (Heb. 4:12).

Thus, St. Paul says, “*Test yourselves.*” “*Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith,*” he says (2 Cor. 13:5). And we start with the law.

A person of faith acknowledges that “*the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good.*” The law is helpful; it “teaches what is right and pleasing to God, and it rebukes everything that is sin and contrary to God’s will” (Formula of Concord, Epitome, V:3). The law teaches us “what great things God requires of us” (Epitome, V:9). You shall not covet is the example that Paul uses in our Epistle. Apart from the commandment, he says, we would not know what coveting is. Apart from the law, we “*would not have known sin.*” But examining ourselves according to the law, we find that, in fact, we covet all the time; we find that we break the law in thought, word, or deed, all the time; we realize that we are incapable of keeping God’s perfect commandments, which should drive us to the cross, to the locus of our salvation and forgiveness, to the source of our worthiness before God and our peace.

But it can also be a source of division on earth. The first commandment is a particularly thorny commandment for us that Jesus highlights. “You shall have no other gods”? Of course, we say! There is but one God (Isa. 44:6). Of course, we are to worship and serve Him only (Matt. 4:10). We even know what Luther teaches about this commandment: “We should fear, love, and trust in God above all things” (Luther, Small Catechism, First Commandment). And that means Jesus, “true God, begotten of the Father from eternity” (SC, Apostles’ Creed, 2nd Article).

Yet, Jesus here warns us of an idol: “*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.*” Oww! That sword is piercing. Dear Christians, fathers and mothers, sons and daughters are precious gifts of God, but Jesus says, you dare not make idols of them. You dare not love the gift more than the Giver, worshipping and serving “*the creature rather than the Creator*” (Rom. 1:25).

And this can be especially distressing, for the confession of Jesus brings division in the home. It can set “*a man against his father, and a daughter against*

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*her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law.*” It’s troubling when “*a person’s enemies*” are found in “*his own household.*” It hurts to suffer the loss of close (even family) relationships all for the sake of Christ, because we cling to Jesus in faith. It can be a cross, but the believer that takes up this cross and follows Jesus will discover that he has found real life forever — “*whoever loses his life for [Jesus’] sake will find it.*”

The sword of the Word includes the Gospel. Examine your faith according to this Word also, the good news of Jesus Christ and Him crucified, according to the Word that tells you that a death has occurred that has freed you from your captivity to the law and from the law’s condemnation. “*In Christ Jesus,*” it has set you free “*from the law of sin and death*”(Rom. 8:1-2). Baptized into Him, we have died with Him in these waters, died to the law, and have been raised up again to walk in newness of life, in “*the new way of the Spirit and not in the old way of the written code.*”

I don’t suggest that this way is easy. All this talk of crosses and losing one’s life to gain life, of loving Jesus more than anything else. Surely it’s not easy, even as He Himself said: “*the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life*” (Matt. 7:14). But Jesus is that way, and though it may come with a sword, following Him will ultimately bring you to the peace that passes all understanding (Phil. 4:7).

Come, therefore. Come to the table and be strengthened for the way. Come, eat and drink, and depart in peace.

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit.