

Alex Cain:

Pray with me, would you?

Our Father in heaven,

we ask that you bless the preaching of your word with the anointing of the Holy Spirit, to the end that we may love Jesus more deeply and follow him more closely than when we first began.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, amen. Amen. I receive it.

I met my wife when I was attending my first seminary. Our social circles overlapped some, and so occasionally we would have lunch together.

Now, for this story, it's important to note that the men at this seminary were, what shall we say, a little too full of themselves.

And they, okay, we would get into all sorts of theological and non-theological arguments that would step on everybody's toes.

And so we're at lunch one day, and one such conversation happens.

We're going back and forth, it's very sharp,

and somebody unwittingly pulled Ava into this conversation.

Now, Ava, my future wife at this point, is sitting next to me, and what we had known about her at that point was that she was a very sweet, very sheltered, mostly introverted woman.

What we didn't know was that Ava also had a killer wit, and she had a masterful, honed sense of sarcasm.

And so when this person pulled her into this very sharp conversation, I don't remember what was said, but she retorts in a way that undercuts his bravado and pushes him back on his heels.

And all of us were moments where silence struck in awe that that came out of her.

And then we all erupted in laughter.

And that's when I knew that she was the one for me.

Now I tell you that story because it's kind of like our gospel lesson today.

The picture that you and I most often conjure up when we think of Jesus is one of love and tenderness.

It's gentle Jesus, meek and mild. We're not expecting him to come out swinging like he does in this passage.

But here he's telling his disciples and the crowds that he's come to cast fire upon the earth, that he wishes it were already kindled. Unless they misunderstand him, he asked, "Do you think that I've come to bring peace to the earth? "No, I tell you, but rather division."

He speaks about households being divided, set against one another. And then he turns to the larger crowds and he calls them hypocrites, foolish people, for being able to forecast the coming weather, but not being able to tell the coming events of their time.

And what's not included in our electionary passage this morning is that the final three verses of this chapter is where Jesus doubles down on this critique. He tells them a parable about the folly of not settling with an adversary outside of courts.

In that story, the person has a losing case. And if they don't settle, then they will certainly be thrown into prison.

And he ends the story with this sober line.

"Certainly, I tell you, you will not get out of prison "until you have paid the very last penny."

"Fire, division, foolish people who will rot in prison."

It's the opposite of a love poem.

"What are you and I to do with a Jesus like this?"

"What is he saying to them?"

"And more relevant, what is he saying to us?"

These kinds of passages are often found in a list titled something like "The Hard Sayings of Jesus."

And when dealing with these hard sayings, it's important for us to employ two guardrails.

One, don't explain away the hard saying. It is, after all, a hard saying.

And two, don't turn the hard saying into a harsh saying.

And depending on who you are, you may be tempted to go through one or the other guardrail. Different people go different ways.

And sometimes the same person can be tempted to go through both guardrails at different seasons in their life. At least that's been true for me.

Take, for instance, the second guardrail. Don't turn the hard saying into a harsh saying.

Were I to preach this passage when I were younger, say, when I was at that first seminary, I would be in danger of going through this guardrail.

This language of the passage wouldn't have fazed me, and in my bravado, I may even have felt emboldened to turn up the heat a little bit, to really lay it on thick. Jesus is bringing fire, after all. He's bringing judgment, and you better get your life rights before you're dragged before that judge and thrown into that fire forever.

Something like that.

Heavy words.

I had a preacher once tell me that he preached, quote, "a scorcher of a sermon that previous Sunday."

And he said it with a chuckle and a smile, and even back then, it rubbed me a little wrong way.

Now, I'm not saying that we should avoid discussing judgment. I think that that's eventually where Jesus brings the crowd that he's addressing.

But he doesn't do so with a sense of bravado, or with a chuckle and a smile.

To do that would be to speak harsh words to them and to us.

I know you see the difference, friends. Harsh words are spoken when hard sayings are overstated with a lack of care.

That is not how your God speaks to you. It's not how he spoke to this crowd either.

In just the next chapter, Jesus is still dealing with the obstinate people, and he pours out his heart for them in the well-known lament. "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her,

how I have longed to gather your children together,

like a mother hen gathers her chicks under her wings.

He wants to be close to them. He wants to provide for them. He wants to protect them.

That is his heart for them, even in the midst of a hard saying."

Parents, you know this all too well.

When you have to tell your children hard things, you're not doing so with a chuckle and a smile. You're not doing so with a sense of bravado. You're telling them something hard for their benefit because you want their good. You want intimacy with them, to protect them, to provide for them.

So that's one guardrail. Don't turn the hard saying into a harsh saying, because frankly, Jesus never has harsh words for you.

The other guardrail we need to keep in mind is not to explain away the hard saying.

This might be a more common temptation for us. We look at these hard words, and we grimace.

Maybe you're a visitor here this morning, come to see the precious baptisms of these little ones and children.

The gospel book is walked out to you, five feet from you, and you hear these words.

"I've come to bring fire on the earth.

"Families will be divided on baptism Sunday, no less."

Thanks, Billy.

And then Jesus adds, "Just for extra measure, you're foolish for not being able to tell the signs of your time.

"And now you, as a visitor, is all coming back to you. "The reason is why you left this archaic, guilt-tripping religion behind.

"And now imagine how I felt "when I looked at the passage for this service.

"This is what I'm preaching on.

"I have to stand here and talk to you about all of this, "so you can see how the temptation "to explain the hard saying away creeps in.

"And that goes doubly for those of us who have been harmed by harsh sayings of religious leaders.

"We know the deep pain that comes from being harmed, "manipulated and mistreated in a spiritual context, "a context that is supposed to be for your good,

"supposed to care for you, cultivate you.

"We need in those situations the Jesus who is gentle and lowly of hearts, "the Jesus of which is said, "a bruised reed he will not break, "and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out.

"And it's hard for us to believe "that that Jesus is the same Jesus in our passage.

"But when we have soft hearts, "when we're in that situation, when we're fragile, "and we need that extra care, "it's important for us to remember who Jesus is addressing in passages like these. "The recipients of hard sayings "are not soft-hearted people, "not fragile people who need the extra care, "but rather hard-hearted people, "people who need to be woken up, "who need to be shaken a bit, "who need that proverbial splash of water in the face.

"They need to know what's going on."

I was talking to a friend who graduated from the counseling program last May, at the same time that I graduated from the Bible and Theology program. And I told her that I was preaching on

this passage, and she begins to think about this reality of how hard hearts develop in our own lives,

how they can creep in? She's reflecting, and she says that we can get stuck in our old ways of thinking or the value systems of our own culture.

She said, "We think that we're autonomous,

"that we can do it on our own, "that we're the ones that bring success to our lives, "we're the ones that bring coherence to our stories, "that we are the ones that make it happen." And she says, "Wrong, that's not true. "We are in relationship with God and one another. "And that means by virtue of a relationship, "conflict is inevitable,

"but healthy conflicts always results "in deeper intimacy on the other side."

Which is what Jesus is after here.

Yes, he's bringing fire, a fire that causes divisions in families, but not because Jesus is anti-family. He's not chuckling and smiling to himself about fathers and sons and mothers and daughters being against one another.

We get more insights in a parallel passage in Matthew, where Jesus says, "Do not think that I've come to bring peace to earth, "but I've come to bring a sword.

"I've come to set father and son against each other, "and so on and so forth." And he says, "Whoever loves father and mother "more than me is not worthy of me. "Whoever loves son or daughter more than me "is not worthy of me. "And whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me. "Those who find their life, "who do it on their own, "who are the autonomous, they will lose it.

"But those who lose their life for my sake,

"they will truly find their life."

These are hard words.

The meaning here is that when you look at your life, when you look at your heart, when you look at your affections, what is your life centered around? What is the highest value in your life?

And if anything is over Jesus, when you look at that, then Jesus is saying, "Divisions will come."

Because what your heart should be centered around is me. And Jesus is worth that. And I'm here to tell you today, Jesus is worth your highest value, your deepest affections. And I don't tell you that because that's the right answer, because that's my job to tell you that. I tell you that because I know the character of Jesus. I know his integrity, I know his care, I know his love for you. When you know what Jesus can do for you, when you know how deeply he cares for you, how angry he is at the vile evil things, the misfortunes in your life, you know what he has done to turn that around, to flip everything on its head because he cares for you. The natural response is to want

Jesus to be first in your child's life, is to want Jesus to be first in your life, your husband's life, your wife's life.

That is what Jesus is after. He's not after me, me, me, me, me, me, me.

He's after your care, your good.

He's after intimacy with you and every member of your family. He is your God who longs to draw you under his wings as a mother hen.

This is a hard saying because in that day, much like ours, the narrative was that family is everything. There's nothing more important than family. You and I say blood is thicker than water.

But Jesus says not so in the family of God. He gives both blood and water to unite us to him. When things work the way that they're supposed to, when Satan doesn't creep in, gain a foothold, but is renounced, then the family is united as well.

But not around the ideal of the family unit, this perfect kind of nuclear family system that we've conjured in our minds, but around the Jesus who says, "Bring the little ones to me. "Bring the children to me. "Do not hinder them, "for to them belongs the kingdom of God."

And as far as signs and interpreting them of our day, I do not think that it's a stretch to say that these sacraments of baptism and the Eucharist, of which we are about to partake, are the signs for our day that we must understand.

They are serious matters that tell us Jesus is Lord and that that same Jesus welcomes us to him, to be united to him. And he gives himself for us for greater intimacy

and victory over all that would separate.

That is the Jesus we are dealing with in this passage.

That is the Jesus who is for you, for your children, for the good of all of creation.

Amen.