Letting Jesus Rock Our World

“I didn’t come to bring peace to the earth, but a sword. I have come to turn a man against his father, a daughter against her mother...” My first response in hearing those words was “Yikes, why didn’t one of the paid guys get this assignment”? This sure doesn’t sound like something the Prince of Peace would say.

But Jesus often uses hyperbole and irony to get our attention. Samaritans become the good guys, the last become first, water becomes wine. He wants to rock our world. Following Jesus means dying to old ways and habits. The family is a place of security and safety; the bedrock of society, responsible for teaching its values and customs to the next generation. So when Jesus suggests that His movement will divide even this most basic of institutions, he is signaling that Christianity is about change.

He didn’t come to make nice with the world. He came to overturn tables and challenge the powers that be. He came to bring good news to those on the other side of power. He came to change you and me too. The sword he brings doesn’t kill, but it does shake things up. And so this gospel isn’t easy to hear. Change is difficult. We prefer to avoid it. We tend to listen only to information that confirms our
already formed opinions. We prefer people who think like us. We don’t like to change our views.

We go to Church to find shelter from the storm. We love the peace we get inside these walls, we like the ancient hymns and rituals that connect us to unchanging principals and traditions. “Give me that old time religion.” Yet today Jesus talks about a faith that is far more challenging.

On the surface, Jesus’ message actually sounds pretty easy: “Love God and your neighbors.” While it sounds simple, loving people the way Jesus does, can complicate your relationships because you will love the outsider too, the one others dislike. And because of that, you will be criticized. Are you willing to be an outsider even among your friends? I don’t know about you, but I need to be loved. Yet the reality is that this kind of love can put you at odds with some of the people you feel close to; most especially, other Christians.

Jesus said that we should be known for our love, but the hard fact is that outsiders don’t see Christians that way right now. The old camp song says "They will know we are Christians by our love, by our love..." But many Christians these days are more likely to show their dogma and their prejudices, than their love.
Arthur J. Burns was a Jew, and advisor to presidents from Eisenhower to Reagan. He was also a member of an informal prayer group that met in the White House. For many years he attended faithfully but was never asked to lead a prayer, until a newcomer, unaware that Burns was Jewish, asked him to pray. Burns obliged by bowing his head and saying, "Lord, I pray that you would bring Jews to know Jesus Christ, I pray that you would bring Muslims to know Jesus Christ, and finally, I pray that you would bring Christians to know Jesus Christ. Amen." In a similar vein, Gandhi, who always professed great interest in Jesus, once told an Anglican priest friend: "I do not like your Christians, they are so unlike your Christ."

Why is that? What led these two deeply caring people to conclude that Jesus and His followers were not always on the same page? I think it’s because talking about loving folks outside your group is a lot easier than actually doing it. Loving like Jesus complicates our world. It can even turn it upside down. Too often Christianity in America has become just another word for faith in the status quo—a civil religion rather than the wildly challenging faith that Jesus teaches.

Jesus asks us to love the outsider just as much as the insider. In Jesus’ world there is no room for homophobia or Islamophobia, racism or sexism. Care and concern for the hungry or the poor or the
immigrant or the prisoner is just as important as care and concern for those closest to us. Christianity isn’t a political belief, but it does speak truth to power, and so it challenges the status quo. Fundamentally it suggests that in order to participate in God’s hopes and dreams for the world, I must change and my relationship to the world must change.

Following Jesus requires tearing down the walls that make life comfortable and predictable and building bridges to those who are different from us. Only when those walls come down can we catch a glimpse of the Kingdom the Gospel imagines. That requires a leap of faith. And Birmingham, perhaps as much as any community in America, professes to be a community of great faith.

I feel particularly blessed to have found my way here some 37 years ago. This city is a wonderfully complex and contradictory place. At first it seemed such a profound mismatch for this Yankee sociologist. I was certain we would only be here for a few years. It would just be a way station to get my act back together and move on. All I knew of Birmingham were the vivid pictures of racial struggle and violence.

And yet this place soon became home. I am not going to pretend that it’s always been easy. There is much positive. Birmingham is not only deeply religious, but very generous to charities, with some of the nicest folks I’ve ever met, and some of the best food. But we remain
divided. We have some of the very best schools in the country and some of the worst. Our neighborhoods are still very segregated, and the disparity between black and white, rich and poor is wide. We have such a distrust of government’s ability to change anything that we tolerate deep differences in income, quality of housing, health and education. We are divided into so many little governmental units, school systems, police and water systems that it’s hard to get anything really big done. **And yet there is something so deeply promising about this place.** That promise is captured in a plaque at the entrance to Kelly Ingram Park which reads: “A Place of Revolution and Reconciliation”.

You see we don’t run away from our history, we acknowledge it. Instead of hiding from our earlier reputation as Bombingham we build a civil rights museum next to Sixteenth Street Baptist Church, and in Kelley Ingram Park we place a sculpture of the snarling dogs and firehoses, and we erect a monument to the four little girls murdered in that church over 50 years ago. And now we have created a Federal Civil Rights District to acknowledge that history.

In a recent speech to a group of civic leaders Rabbi Jonathan Miller gave a farewell address that captures my own hope for this city. Here is what he said: “Fifty plus years ago, Birmingham was the embodiment of oppression and injustice. Other places were bad too.
But Birmingham has remained active in the consciousness of America and the world. If you say Memphis, you think of Graceland and Beale Street, not the Lorraine Motel. New Orleans is Jazz and Bourbon Street, not the auction blocks where human beings were sold.”

But Birmingham cannot seem to escape its history of racial tension and violence. Indeed we have embraced it, as shameful as it was decades ago; it is our city’s greatest strength. It is the catapult to a better future for all. What we do here, in the shadow of what occurred during those fateful and defining years, has moral and spiritual relevance. Once upon a time, our name was associated with pain and bigotry. Today, we have the opportunity, more than any city in our nation, to be a beacon for justice and redemption. We can be evidence that injustice can be overcome. “A scant half century ago, this was impossible, but we can be the redeemers,” Rabbi Miller says. “Never forget that. We can be the redeemers of hope and freedom and change and transformation. God depends on us.”

Those are powerful words about the role that Birmingham can have in God’s hopes and dreams for our broken world. And the Church must be in the forefront of that effort. Saint Luke’s has a unique history in this community. From our beginnings we have been a bridge builder. Its rectors were active advocates for racial justice in this city. Much of
our outreach efforts have focused on building bridges with North Birmingham and the Norwood neighborhood. Preschool Partners, the Norwood Resource Center, STAIR, and our partnership with Norwood Elementary School represent serious efforts to break down racial and economic barriers and empower those with limited resources. I’ve been hugged by a lot of beautiful children these past couple of weeks during the Junior Master Gardener Program. I’ve watched them learning how to dig and plant, how to cook healthy foods, and how to respect God’s good earth. Just a few weeks before the garden program started, STAIR sent out reading scores for the students our parish tutored this year. Every student showed marked improvement. That partnership between teachers, students and tutors is working. It is so deeply satisfying to see what is happening in Norwood.

That is gospel living. When we let God rock our world, when we die to old ways, when we follow Jesus, the transformation that can occur to the community around us can be amazing. Jesus reminds us that the Gospel is about relationships. It’s not about tradition or charity, it is about change. “Love God, love your neighbor, change the world.” It’s happening in Birmingham, and thanks be to God, Saint Luke’s is playing an important role in that change. In one way or another each of you are already participating in that change by supporting our outreach efforts. But if you would like to do more I hope
that you’ll consider participating in one of the many outreach opportunities we offer. There are still a few weeks left to volunteer at the Junior Master Gardener Camp or you can volunteer to mentor a second grader at Norwood Elementary this fall in the STAIR program. You can be part of the Gospel driven change that is happening in our community. And I promise that you will be blessed in the process.