

**St. Bartholomew's Church in the Town of Tonawanda, N.Y**

The Rev. Fr. John E. Commins+ Associate Rector

Scripture: Matthew 10:34-42

***"Multiplication By Division"***

One bright and beautiful Sunday morning, people gathered in the church and listened to the organ play. Suddenly, Satan appeared at the front of the church. Everyone started screaming and running for the door, trampling each other in a frantic effort to get away from him.

Everyone left except for one elderly gentleman who sat calmly in his pew, not moving, seemingly oblivious to the fact that God's ultimate enemy was in his presence.

Now this confused Satan a bit, so he walked up to the man and said, "Don't you know who I am?" The man replied, "Yep, sure do." Satan asked, "Aren't you afraid of me?" "Nope, sure ain't," said the man.

Satan was a little perturbed at this and asked, "Why aren't you afraid of me?" The man calmly replied, "Been married to your sister for 48 years!"

Isn't it true that Satan always tries dampening our joy, our expectations, shaking our foundation and our faith?

This week's Gospel is filled with messages that deal with expectations of the people of Israel – and Jesus hits them right where they live – in their family! Some would be excited and follow and some would not and reject the message and the messenger. In first century Israel, the people were expecting the anointed One of God – the Messiah – to be a triumphant warrior, who would free the people from their captors and bring a time of peace. Jesus indeed tells that peace is coming, but it is a ways off in the future.

The passage about sons and daughters is taken right from the Prophet Micah (7:6) *"For son treats father contemptuously, Daughter rises up against her mother, Daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; a man's enemies are the men of his own household."* The Prophet said that terrible divisions would come as God would do something new for humanity. God stepped into history to rescue mankind – and sadly some of mankind replied "we don't need rescuing!" Jesus quoted this passage from Micah to alert the people to not be surprised if this happens when God acts to save you. We see it in Middle Eastern families today when a person comes to Christ and then breaks the news to the rest of the Jewish or Muslim family. They are most often disowned and shunned – as if they are dead to them!

We can see it in the church today –and as a matter of fact we can see it everywhere today – as people reject change – reject stepping out of their comfort zone. People reject signing up for something they don't understand or see it unfolding the way they envisioned it. I can remember when Marilyn, John, Theresa and I came back from our trip to Israel in 1999 and we told family members of our trip, of my healing, and of my call to the priesthood –and that one family member, Marilyn's Aunt, asked if we had joined a cult? It was not what she expected or understood. The good news is that before she passed away, a few years later, she had a remarkable conversion experience. She saw evil appear to taunt her in her hospital room, and we told her what to do, she drove it out with the name of Jesus. She then saw Jesus as her savior and accepted Him completely and totally. How great is that? Sometimes it is a process that requires love and prayer to nurture the seed that is planted.

Jesus is not telling us that everyone who follows Him will have to forsake their families and split off from them – on the contrary – we have proof that many of the Apostles took their families with them. The evidence is in 1 Corinthians 9:5 - *"Do we not have a right to take along a believing wife, even as the rest of the apostles and the brothers of the Lord and Cephas?"* What the Lord is speaking about it priorities. Jesus is saying loud and clear that what

matters is allegiance to Him. Remember last week when I started my sermon with the words from Genesis 1:1 “***In the beginning God***”? Following Jesus, following God means that He must be at the top of our priorities list. If you think for one minute Jesus does not know how hard this will be – remember He was betrayed by a chosen friend, denied three times by a most dear and trusted friend, and saw the rest of His friends run away and hide when He was arrested. In the world we can expect hostility and even hatred, for Jesus experienced this from some of those around him. The world is a place where many do not honor God, trust in His love, or walk in His ways. The world is also a place where Satan, the evil one, is actively at work, seeking to keep people satisfied with anything BUT the worship of God alone – unfortunately sometimes his effects can run close to home – even within families – and then comes division and dissension because of serious disagreeing viewpoints.

If you recall last week I used the phrase that is often credited to St. Francis of Assisi “Preach the Gospel always, and if necessary use words.” Francis was the son of a very wealthy man, who left all of the riches, despite his father’s anger, to go and live a simpler life, imitating Jesus as much as he could. He experienced this division and separation first hand.

I believe that Jesus is telling us that proclaiming His Gospel and the truth of the Kingdom of God may mean that we have to sacrifice some human relationships, and some of them might be intimate or family relationships. Let’s face it – the way of the world leads to a shallow and temporary fulfillment – filled with frustration and disappointment. Yielding and submitting to Jesus and to the service of God and His Kingdom – will find a richer life – filled with fulfillment and deep abiding joy. Much of this is found in the awaiting of His coming again; those who love Jesus more than themselves realize true and lasting self-satisfaction – obtaining personal fulfillment and the goal of their existence. (Luke 14:26) “*If anyone comes to Me, and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be My disciple.*” Jesus is simply asking to put God first!

Jesus came to take on flesh so that He could establish a new way of being God’s people. This is where it got dicey – because the people like the old way of doing things – and do not like having it disturbed. Jesus did not want to bring division within household just for the sake of division – it was just that if people followed His Way – it was bound to happen.

It is important to note that the verses immediately before today’s Gospel are: “*Therefore everyone who confesses Me before men, I will also confess him before My Father who is in heaven. But whoever denies Me before men, I will also deny him before My Father who is in heaven.*” (Matthew 10:32-33) These are some remarkable promises to those who will follow Him, who accept Him, and who live by His ways. Jesus says that He will stand up for us before His Father in heaven. Those who lose their lives will gain them, and with those promises comes an important challenge – one that will grate many people. There are many who would rather be served than to serve. Jesus says that if you give a cup of cold water to the little ones, the least of these – you are in effect giving it to Him, giving it to God, and your reward will be great. If you receive Jesus - you receive the Father, and ironically, if you receive the one carrying Jesus’ message - then you receive Him and the Father.

If you think of it this way – growing the Kingdom of God is “multiplication by division.” When I mentioned that to someone as my title for this week’s sermon – their response was -- “Wow - that is deep!” Catchy maybe, but I don’t think it is that deep... let me put it this way –

remember the parable of the wheat and the tares where there is a sorting out during the harvest? Think of it even as a pruning taking place. Let me give you a good example – I was leaving the other day – going out the choir door in the back – where I always get a great view of the beautiful rose garden. Lauri-Anne was cutting everything down – and when I told her that I had mentioned the gardens in the next CHATTER, she said – oh no, I pruned it too soon. I reminded her that through her pruning the garden would be even more beautiful and full next week. Watch and see!

God makes His message of salvation and His invitation of Eternal Life available to everyone – but not everyone chooses to accept – it is their decision, their choice. Do you remember the old TV show Mission Impossible – with Peter Graves as Jim Phelps? There was a scene at the beginning of every show that had Jim - or his predecessor Dan Briggs, played by Steven Hill, opening an envelope and listening to a small reel to reel tape recorder, that would self-destruct. The tape would say “Your mission Jim (or Dan) **should you decide to accept it...**” How ironic – the choice – the free will has been given to us and is always ours – the mission is laid out before us. God’s message, however, does not self-destruct: *“For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life. For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through Him.”* (John 3:16-17) The believers in Jesus Christ are called to carry His Word into the world, sharing the Great Commission – and making more disciples. We are not to judge – just to carry the message – the judgment is up to Almighty God. How often we hear people making comments about others and their walk – and if someone were to question them – their response is *“Do not judge so that you will not be judged.”* (Matthew 7:1) If only they would have kept reading because Jesus had quite a lot to say about judging; Jesus continued to say *“For in the way you judge, you will be judged; and by your standard of measure, it will be measured to you. Why do you look at the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye?”* (Matthew 7:2-3) You see, when you point a finger at someone – there are three more pointing right back at you! It starts from within! I am sorry to tell you that there are some Christians who are act so self-righteous and judging of others that they give the name “Christian” a “black eye” and completely shut people off from even considering Christianity. How divisive is that? It starts from within! *Oh Lord, let us stop judging, and enable us to keep sharing your Gospel –with your love and without question.*

It starts from within! Jesus said *“The kingdom of heaven is like leaven, which a woman took and hid in three pecks of flour until it was all leavened.”* (Matthew 13:33) Leaven – or yeast is the special ingredient that makes bread rise – or multiply in size. It starts from within – the yeast ferments and helps to increase the dough until you have not one loaf but many.

In closing, I want to leave you with these thoughts today – and some things that we need to think about incorporating into our daily lives:

- We live in this world and it is becoming increasingly difficult to not conform to the standards of this world, but we need to be in obedience to the Father's word, just as Jesus did. We are to be in the world, but not of the world. The Apostle Paul wrote: *“do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect.”* (Romans 12:2) By staying in His

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Word we can be made holy by the truth of God's Word - by the beauty of His laws, and by the power of His Holy Spirit.

- Through seeking and having a real relationship with God, we can reflect the perfect love that has existed between the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit through all eternity. There is a Greek word called the *perichoresis*. My dear friend and beloved professor Dr. Les Fairfield – from Trinity School for Ministry describes this as “the dance” – the full ongoing eternal relationship of the Triune God. It is the reality of love in our lives which will be one of the most powerful means of people in the world seeing the beauty of the message of Christ. By our love people will know that the Father sent the Son into the world. By our love for one another, people will know that we are loved by God. Plainly put – it is about relationships! “*And they will know we are Christians by our love!*”
- And finally, we must pray, just as Jesus prayed. We need to pray for ourselves, for our faithfulness to the Father's Word and His call upon our lives; for people to come to faith in Jesus the Messiah, through the Word; and for the whole world to come to know Jesus, through our lives, through our love, through our example, through the Holy Gospel and by the working of the Holy Spirit. Multiplication by Division.