

“Crisis of Faith”  
August 17, 2025  
Scripture: Jeremiah 23:23-29; Luke 12:49-56

There are some passages in the Bible that are just hard to wrap our heads around. This one in Luke qualifies, I think. Why would Jesus say things like this? We like to think of him as a peaceful presence in our lives. But when he tells his followers to expect conflict and division, not just in relation to society around them, but in their own families, it's a little hard to take. Is this hyperbole? Or is it a reflection of the reality being faced by the community behind Luke's gospel? Or, is there an inherent risk when we follow Jesus' teachings of friction developing between us and the people closest to us?

I've been reading a book recently called *Cultish*, by a linguist named Amanda Montell. She looks at the language used by cult movements to draw in their followers and keep them committed, even when it leads to their own harm. In a cult all the power flows up to the cult leader who is able to influence followers through various mechanisms like sleep deprivation or constant work. But the most common is through a relentless barrage of talk. In Jonestown, Guyana, Jim Jones' voice was broadcast over loudspeakers all day and night. He was constantly talking to them. In the Synanon cult that started as an addiction recovery program in California in the late '50's, the founder, Chuck Dederich, broadcast his voice on a radio network that linked the different sites across the country. Anything these leaders said was considered precious, so it was all broadcast and recorded.

The words of cult leaders are intended to manipulate their followers and keep them compliant. Everything the followers do is meant to serve the benefit of the leader. But I don't hear that in Jesus' words. I don't think he's telling his followers to reject their families and focus all their attention on him. But he is warning them of the effect following his teachings will have on the people around them. And he's warning them there's a cost to discipleship. It demands something of us. Realizing that can cause a crisis of faith.

Jesus brings his followers to a moment when they must make a decision. Now, that moment might come again and again in our lives, it's seldom a one and done kind of thing. But if we are taking his words to heart and are truly seeking to follow his teachings, then we'll realize the risk involved. It's not easy, for instance, to show compassion toward people the wider society has deemed deficient. It's not easy, and can cause division in families, to advocate for undocumented immigrants or transgender people. When we follow Jesus' example and offer compassion and acceptance to people who have been rejected or oppressed, we are taking a risk and it can get very messy.

And it's important, I think, to keep in mind that Jesus isn't asking his followers to do anything their tradition hasn't already taught them. The Torah is very clear about how to live in community and how to treat people who are vulnerable. One of Jesus' criticisms of his society is the tendency to focus on following rules and rituals while ignoring actual human needs. That's not a novel criticism. Many of the prophets in Israel's history have the same concern.

We can hear echoes of it in Jeremiah's words. Jeremiah is criticizing the royal prophets who feed the people propaganda about Judah's righteousness and God's obligation to protect them no matter how much they violate Torah. They're apparently making claims based on dreams or visions they've had. He says, "They plan to make my people forget my name by their dreams that they tell one another." By calling them out, Jeremiah was taking a huge risk. And, in fact, he became a target. There were threats on his life; he was thrown down a cistern; he was made a pariah in Jerusalem. At one point, he complains to God about it. He says, "I did not sit in the company of merry-makers, nor did I rejoice; under the weight of your hand I sat alone, for you had filled me with indignation. Why is my pain unceasing, my wound incurable, refusing to be healed? Truly, you are to me like a deceitful brook, like waters that fail." Jeremiah is brought to a crisis of faith because the message God has given him for Judah creates division between him and the rest of society.

So, what Jesus is warning his followers about is not something new or unexpected. The kinds of divisions he foresees occur whenever we take a stand for compassion and justice. And like he says, we ought to be able to see it coming. The real question is, given that we know there will be resistance, are we willing to live the gospel Jesus teaches?

Most of us have never had to face that crisis. We live in a world where our faith is seldom challenged. Certainly there's poverty and bigotry, but for the last 60 years or so, people in power in our country have at least acknowledged the need to address it. Through the Civil Rights Act, Medicare and Medicaid, the Voting Rights Act, our leaders have generally supported programs that made life better for vulnerable populations. They aren't perfect, and sometimes they get it wrong, but the churches like ours have been comfortable with things as they are. But things are changing.

More and more we're seeing the rise of expressions of Christianity that do not sound at all like the gospel of Jesus Christ. When people who identify as Christian celebrate the mistreatment of undocumented immigrants in places like "Alligator Alcatraz" or deporting them to places like Sudan and Libya or to a torture prison in El Salvador, it's a shock to those of us who believe compassion and empathy are at the heart of the gospel and not retribution and cruelty. It's a shock to see members of our country's military deployed on the streets of our cities for the sole purpose of intimidation. Christians are becoming more and more divided over this; families are being divided over it. And we are reaching a crisis point in our faith.

What we can learn from the prophets, like Jeremiah, or from the gospels and their depictions of Jesus, is the importance of standing firm in God's call to justice and compassion no matter how unjust and cruel society around us might become. We may not have much influence on the forces behind that injustice, but if we don't stay true to the gospel of Christ, then there'll be nothing left to rebuild on once the system taking now collapses. And it will fall. That was Jeremiah's core message. Judah was going to fall because it abandoned the way of Torah, the way of justice. Jesus tells his listeners to pay attention to the signs of corrosion in their society, just as they would to the signs of rain and heat in the sky.

What's happening in our society, the cruel treatment of immigrants, the hostility toward transgender people, the calls for militarizing our streets, these things will not last. Taking away

access to healthcare and food support from poor people, benefiting the wealthy at the expense of the poor is not sustainable. And promoting a version of the faith that rejects empathy and seeks to replace a pluralistic democracy with a Christo-centered theocracy is bound to fail.

Nonetheless, standing firm in the gospel, as Jesus tells us, will cause division. It isn't easy.

Families will be divided. But if we are to maintain our integrity as disciples of Christ, we must speak out for compassion and justice and stand with those in our community who are at risk.

Ninety years ago, in 1934, a group of Reformed Christians in Germany, calling themselves the Confessing Church, produced the Declaration of Barmen which is part of our denomination's Book of Confessions. In the Declaration these Christians made clear their rejection of a state-run church in Germany and the ideology of the German Christians that had pledged its support to Adolph Hitler. According to the introduction to the Declaration in our Book of Confessions: "Most Germans took the union of Christianity, nationalism, and militarism for granted, and patriotic sentiments were equated with Christian truth. The German Christians exalted the racially pure nation and the rule of Hitler as God's will for the German people." Our tradition has a long history of resisting these kinds of movements, and until recently so did our country. The crisis of our faith today is whether we can withstand the allure of power and control and remain true to Christ's gospel of compassion and justice no matter what the cost.

Amen