

“Dividing Families”

Matthew 10:34-42

First Presbyterian Church, Corpus Christi, TX

Rev. Charles S. Blackshear • June 30, 2013

This week we will once again, as a nation, celebrate our independence. On the evening of July 4, 1776, the Continental Congress, meeting in Philadelphia, finally agreed on the wording of a declaration of independence from King George and Great Britain. The idea for the Declaration came in a resolution on June 7 by Richard Henry Lee that Congress should declare its independence from Britain as British troops were arriving in New York.

The colonies were already at war. Paul Revere’s famous midnight ride had taken place over a year earlier in April of 1775. The congress appointed a committee made up of John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, Roger Sherman, Robert Livingston, and Thomas Jefferson to write a draft of the declaration.

On July 2, the Congress formally voted to declare independence and then they began to debate the wording, which was approved on July 4. Most of the delegates didn’t sign the Declaration until August of that year with the last person signing the following January.

The Declaration of Independence announced to the world “the unanimous decision of the thirteen colonies to separate from Great Britain. But what made it a truly revolutionary statement was and is the declaration that the authority of government comes from “the laws of nature and nature’s God.” They went on to say that “all men are created equal” and “that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights.” In other words, it was because of their faith in God that the Founding Fathers felt they needed to separate from England and they did so with “a firm reliance on the protection of divine providence.”

In addition to being a declaration of the nation’s independence, it was also a call for people to declare their loyalty. The authors of the Declaration strongly believed that every

person living in the colonies had to decide whether to be loyal to the king or to God. The Declaration of Independence ends with these words: “with a firm reliance on the protection of divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes and our sacred Honor.” As they had said earlier in the document, they were appealing to the “Supreme Judge of the world.”

But not everyone in the colonies agreed with the cause. It’s estimated that around twenty percent of people living in America at the time were loyal to King George. These included lots of people who made their living by being loyal. One of the results of these disagreements was that families were divided in their loyalties.

These divisions included some of the Founding Fathers’ families. For example, John Adams and John Hancock both had in-laws who were loyal to King George and were very outspoken about it. George Washington’s mother and several of his cousins continued to support Britain. When his nephew was arrested, William Livingston, a delegate from New Jersey, said “All families are liable to have degenerate members. Among the twelve Apostles there was at least one traitor.” And of course Benjamin Franklin’s son William defied his father and remained the Royal Governor of New Jersey until his arrest in 1776. When he was released, William fled to England. He and his father never reconciled.

Jesus said, “Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace but a sword.” He explains that parents and children will be separated from each other because of him. “A person’s enemies will be those of his own household.” These are rather shocking statements, especially from someone who is known as the Prince of Peace! In fact, these statements

seem to contradict what Jesus says everywhere else. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus says, "Blessed are the peacemakers." Several times Jesus quoted from the Ten Commandments, "Honor your father and your mother." In John 16 he says, "I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace."

So is there a contradiction here? I don't think so. This is another of the "hard sayings of Jesus," things Jesus said that are difficult to accept or to understand. This passage is made even more difficult because it's been used by many people to justify separating from other people, dividing churches and families over some point of doctrine.

The key to understanding what Jesus is saying here comes from the context. As the saying goes, "a text without a context is a pretext for a proof text." To know what this passage means we need to look at what came before it and we need to interpret Scripture with Scripture, meaning that we need to interpret this passage in light of the whole Bible.

The context here is Jesus sending out his twelve disciples to proclaim that the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand. He gave them authority to preach and to heal sickness and to cast out demons. Then he tells them that they will encounter resistance. There will be people who reject their message and therefore reject Jesus as the Messiah. Now he continues that thought by telling them that even people in their own families will reject them.

It's tempting to read these verses and think that Jesus is condemning the person who rejects us because of our faith. We don't have any trouble thinking that Jesus is talking about our in-laws. But he's talking to each one of us personally as his disciples. This is not about the other person, it's about you and your relationship with Christ in spite of how other people react. In verse 37 he says, "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." Then he adds, "Whoever does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me."

Jesus is not saying you have to hate your family or leave them. The Bible is clear that one of your most important responsibilities in this life is to your family. Instead, Jesus is calling you to love him *more* than anything else in this world, including your family. He's calling you to a life of sacrifice and discipleship.

The Bible is clear that the proper way to respond to those people who reject Jesus is to love them and to pray for them. If you have a family member who doesn't accept Christ, you need to pray for that person often. Maybe get others to pray as well. We are not to try to argue or harass someone into heaven. Instead, we are to demonstrate that the Kingdom of Heaven has come the same way that Jesus did. We are to lovingly proclaim the gospel, we are to heal the sick and comfort the sad. But we can't let our concern for them get in the way of following Christ. He must be our first priority. And when each of us makes Christ our first priority, our relationships with each other are unbreakable.

This is one of the things I share with couples who come to me to get married. I show them that eventually something will happen to damage their relationship. But if they each have a relationship with Christ that is their first priority, they have a bond between them that they don't have the ability to break. Jesus put it like this: "whoever loses his life for my sake will find it." In other words, whoever is willing to give up his life for Jesus' sake will get more that imaginable.

The final section of this passage, beginning in verse 40, contains instructions to us for supporting the mission of Jesus to the world. Not all of us are called to go into the mission field as full-time missionaries.

We're not all going to travel to far-away countries to share the good news of Jesus. But each one of us can support the mission in some way.

Jesus says, "The one who receives a prophet...will receive a prophet's reward, and the one who receives a righteous person...will receive a righteous person's reward." He ends by saying that even if all you do is give a cup of cold water to "one of these little ones," meaning someone who is "least" in the Kingdom of Heaven, you will receive the reward. The point is that it's not about how much you do, it's about your attitude. It's about your heart. You may not feel like you're making much of an impact, but if your passion is to make a difference for Christ, even if it's by supporting others who are out doing the work, it counts. That support can include financial support but it can also include prayer, notes of encouragement, and getting the word out about the work being done.

Two hundred and thirty seven years ago this week, a group of men declared their dependence on God and pledged their lives, their fortunes and their sacred honor to a cause that was not just political, it was religious. They pledged their loyalty to God instead of to a king or even to their own families. For many of them it was costly. But they wouldn't have traded it for anything. Jesus calls us to do the same. Just as those who went before us, we are to pledge our loyalty to Christ ahead of our selves and our families. And we are to support each other in that work, even in seemingly insignificant ways. If we do, we will by no means lose our reward. And we just might win our families and friends for Christ along the way. This Independence Day, may we remember the only source of true freedom – Jesus Christ.

Amen