

Glittering Generalities

Luke 12:49-56

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TEXT: Luke 12:49-56

[Jesus said:] "I have come to bring fire down upon the earth. And, oh, how I wish it were already kindled! But, I have a baptism in which to be baptized, and I will hold firm until that is finished. Do you think that I have arrived to bring peace on earth? No, I tell you, I have come to bring division. For from now on there will be five in the same house, and they will be divided against each other: three against two and two against three. A father will be divided from his son and a son from his father, a mother from her daughter and a daughter from her mother, a mother-in-law from her daughter-in-law and a daughter-in-law from her mother-in-law."

[Jesus] then said to the crowds: "Whenever you see a cloud rising in the west, you immediately say: 'a storm is coming', and so it is. And whenever [you see] the south wind blowing you say: 'it's going to be hot today', and so it is. Does this mean that you know anything that really matters?¹ You know how to determine the meaning of changes in the look of earth and sky, but do you even know how to determine what season it is?"

"Does anybody really know what time it is? Does anybody really care?" Does anyone know that song? It probably dates me as a creature of the Flower Power generation of the 60s when Chicago sang that song.

The time is 1937. The Institute for Propaganda Analysis, headquartered in New York, has just produced a little pamphlet entitled "How to detect propaganda." For nearly two decades, the Soviets had been churning out propaganda. And now, just a few years later, a new regime in Germany has begun to produce vicious racial propaganda, aimed at stirring up the people of Germany against Jews living throughout Europe. We need to purge Europe of Jews and of their power in the European capitals of the world, and when we do, the world will live in harmony and peace. War was on the horizon. In fact, war had already broken out in Spain, where Soviets and Nazis, the two sides in the propaganda war, were already physically at each other's throats.

Propaganda is powerful. If you needed no more proof of it than this, remember: it was propaganda that succeeded in sucking the whole world into war, first Marxist class warfare and then a world war that would destroy millions of lives and from which we still haven't fully recovered as we continue to endure the after-effects of that holocaust.

The 1937 pamphlet sought to alert people to the claims of propagandists in the hope that at the very least, if it couldn't correct the problem in Europe, at least it could help keep Americans themselves from falling prey to false claims. These might come from Marxists, or Nazis, or even, the pamphlet says, from homegrown groups like the Ku Klux Klan.

The pamphlet talked about propaganda as an attempt to influence opinion in such a way as "to 'put something across', good or bad", as opposed to "trying to discover truth and fact" and then presenting truth and fact, regardless of the outcome. The authors

¹ The word normally translated "hypocrites" I have translated "*Does this mean that you know anything that really matters?*" Why? The word is used only 3 times in the Gospel of Luke, as opposed to 13 times in Matthew. In both cases, however, it translates an original Greek word that means "interpreter". The word "interpreter" in Greek meant primarily a specialist in interpreting some texts, be it legal texts or, as in acting, a script, so that, in theatre, the word came to mean "actor", someone who interprets a role. But, in the Gospels it is a complex word that is regularly applied to "interpreters of the law", that is, those who interpret the text. As well, it is consistently used in a way that suggests that they interpret the law but don't really get what the law is actually saying. They only think that they get it. Thus, like bad actors, they get enough of the text to mangle it or just to mouth the words of the script without understanding what the author meant.

wrote: “The propagandist does not want careful scrutiny and criticism...”, but the one who is presenting truth and fact welcomes scrutiny and criticism, in spite of the consequences to himself or his search for truth.

In order to help reveal why propaganda is so effective the pamphlet gives a series of tools that propagandists use to achieve their purposes.²

One tool of propagandists is “The Name Calling Device”. The propagandist appeals to emotions, such as our hatreds and fears, and gives “bad names” associated with these hatreds and fears to individuals or groups so as to make us hate them. Rather than providing an objective overview of the Jewish people or the history of the Jews, the propagandist simply associates Jews with all sorts of bad things like greed and avarice and immorality. People who didn’t have a lot began to hear again and again that Jews had a lot and wanted more, and unwittingly began to hate anyone called a “Jew”. Propagandists of all stripes still use this device today: “he’s a socialist, what can you expect?”, “He reads the National Post; we know what he thinks?”, “He’s a member of that breakaway group of Anglicans; obviously he hates women”.

Another device is “The Band Wagon Device”. The propagandist proclaims that everyone is doing it now so surely you don’t want to be left behind? The pamphlet shows how the device works: The propagandist “hires a hall, fills a great stadium, marches a million men in parade. He employs symbols, colors, music, movement, all the dramatic arts. He appeals to the desire, common to most of us, to ‘follow the crowd’.” And then the propagandist begins to single out those who don’t want to follow the crowd as strange, and awkward. ‘Surely you don’t want to be like them!?’ And boy does it work. It worked in the 1930s and it still works today. Those of you who have seen the movie “Pleasantville” will see a perfect example of the band-wagon device: “come on; everyone’s doing it, so how can it be wrong? You want to do it too, don’t you? Surely you’re not a bigot, are you?” Since no one wants to be called a bigot, or to be left behind, the propagandist successfully gets people to jump on the bandwagon, even if they don’t know which direction they’re headed.

But, a third device of propaganda is the one that I want to draw your attention to this morning. It’s called “The Glittering Generalities Device”. Where the Name Calling device calls up “bad words” to make us angry against certain people or beliefs, the Glittering Generalities Device calls up “good words” that are used to make us happy, or contented, and thus to draw us naturally to what is being sold or offered, whether we know what it is or not. “That deodorant will make you happy, popular, rich, surround you with friends. Just put it on and watch it work.” The Old Spice ad pokes fun at this, while still achieving exactly the same end. Name Calling demonizes and raises us up to fight against something; Glittering Generalities gets us to really want what is being sold and to want more of it, even if we don’t know whether it’s good for us, or not. After all, it feels so good and sounds so good, well, how could it be wrong?

You’re probably wondering what all of this has to do this morning with any of the readings. I can see what 1937 has to do with our age, but what does the year 1937 have to do with the Gospel?

Well, my point is this: the Gospel of this morning is one of the clearest examples I can think of that shows that Jesus was anything but a propagandist. The words of the Gospel of this morning are bound to alienate the very people that Jesus is speaking to, not seduce them through the use of Glittering Generalities. Jesus is not getting people to follow him by making them happy, contented, naturally drawn to what he is selling. If he had been, he would have said something like this

“Follow me, and I will show you how to have perfect families. I will give you those techniques that will enable you to weather all the storms of life and how to keep peace between spouses, between parents and their children. Why, I will even show you how to ensure that a mother-in-law and her son’s new wife can get along! Imagine that!!”

Those are Glittering Generalities. You get them on talk shows and self-help books, including some Christian ones.

Instead we get this in the Gospel:

“I have come to bring fire down upon the earth. ... Do you think that I have arrived to bring peace on earth? No, I tell you, I have come to bring division. For from now on there will be five in the same house, and they will be divided against each other: three against two and two against three. A father will be divided from his son and a son from his father, a mother from her

² The 7 points that it developed are conveniently discussed [here](#).

daughter and a daughter from her mother, a mother-in-law from her daughter-in-law and a daughter-in-law from her mother-in-law. ... You know how to determine the meaning of changes in the look of earth and sky, but do you even know what season it is?"

The hard truth: when the Messiah comes there will not be peace, but war, even in families.

No, Jesus is definitely not a propagandist. Today he would be viewed as some sort of raving sectarian for saying what he says here. But, let me explain briefly how much more he would be viewed with anger by the people of his day to whom family is everything.

The family values of Jesus' world are primarily two.

We are family if we share the same bloodline. Today if we are racially and ethnically alike, it is likely that we are related at some point in our past. For groups like true Scots with their clans, this is still very much true. But, in the first century that was always true. There is not supposed to be any conflict in families. Conflict is created by outsiders, "others".

Think how true this was for Israel. Everyone who lived in Israel shared the same bloodline. They were all descended from Jacob and divided into 12 tribes. True, there were some of Jacob's descendants who were taken into exile and intermarried with pagan gentiles in Assyria. We call them "Samaritans", the Jews say, and so we have nothing to do with them, since they're not family. Family today are those of us who went into exile in Babylonia and remained faithful by keeping our bloodline pure. No one who has polluted the bloodline can be called family. And all those who are not family? Well, they are "dogs", "immoral", "Gentiles", "half-breeds" like the Samaritans. (Can you see the "Name Calling Device" at work here?)

The second family value is that if we do share the same blood line, then everything that I have is yours, and everything that you have is mine. If you are family, then my table is yours, my house is yours. I will only seek a wife for my son from among family, and when my son marries your daughter, we shall affirm that all that I have is yours and what you have is mine. In the first century, if I give a family member any money, I will not expect him or her to pay it back to me. (Same is true with an allowance that you give one of your own children: do you expect them to pay it back? Of course not.)

Into this setting, Jesus comes proclaiming division among family members. This would have sounded horrific to anyone listening to Jesus, for their entire world was built on the solidity and well-defined lines of the family. What could Jesus possibly have been saying?

First you need to know that Jesus was addressing a problem.

Family had been instituted by God. It was intended to be a vehicle of God's blessing, the means by which the world would be populated and managed.

But, sin, which distorts all that is good, also distorted the family, causing it to become an obstacle in the way of God's blessing to the whole of the world. Instead of being an outward blessing to the world, family had become an exclusively inward looking unit. It became a means of valuing what I have over what anyone else has, and of protecting my possessions -- which include my wife, my children, my other belongings -- from "others", because "others" are always a threat to my self-assured value. Rather than going out into the world and making it even more than God had made it, family now became a cloistered and claustrophobic unit, turned in on itself, seeking to hang on to the little that it had. Family became like a walled fortress: those within were good; those without were always suspect and usually dangerous. Others always want what I have: my wife, my daughters, my sons, my possessions, my dreams and aspirations. And so, I must build the walls higher to protect what I have and who I am.

Men were the primary culprit, since to them leadership had been given to make the family this open, unfearing, producing blessing of God. But, women followed quite willingly, keeping the young safe in a nest that was safe, rather than exposing them to harm. And the young grew up knowing that this is what mattered: peace, order, and safety within the walls of the family.

But, Jesus tells it like it is: these walls must be torn down. This kind of family must go.

Well, can you imagine the response to Jesus? I think that you can, not just because of the implications for individual families, but because of what this meant for Israel, which understood itself to be, like all corrupted families, individual and corporate throughout the world, God's unique family, identified by blood.

In fact, you know that they got it because it was non-propaganda words of Jesus like these that eventually led Israel to say: "We've heard enough. He's clearly not one of us."

But, you need to know, especially those of you who may be visiting here this morning, and may not know the context for Jesus' words from the Gospel of Luke that we've been reading since Advent. Jesus is not seeking the destruction of family as such. Jesus is announcing God's plan to undo sin's damage to family and to re-create family as God first intended it, a family that was not defined by blood lines but rather by being created by God after God's own image.

Jesus has in fact begun to create that new family and shows what it looks like. He welcomed not only normal people into his family, but also sinners who had been expelled from their own families into his family. He welcomed Samaritans, half-breeds. He even welcomed Gentiles, clearly non-family and in fact enemies of the family, as members of his family. And as the book of the Acts of the Apostles shows, this family will indeed share everything that it has, one with another, no holds barred.

Jesus announces that the tumbling of these walls is about to begin and that family as God intended it is beginning. God is already bringing into being sons and daughters from whom God alone is Father and from whom fathers in this world only borrow their name. These sons and daughters are going to look at each other, and beyond their immediate family context, both individual and ethnic, are going to say to each other: "hey, you're my brother, you're my sister; I never knew that we were related".

How can this be? How can all of these be family? Through one thing alone, through that baptism that Jesus has yet to go through, His death on the cross and the spilling of His cleansing blood that washes us clean from sin and makes us sons and daughters of the Father. Washed in the blood of Jesus, we arise from the waters of His baptism, not our own, cleansed by God and brothers and sisters of all those who have been similarly washed.

For some 2000 years, the church has been proclaiming this truth that you have heard this morning. This church here this morning is a visible sign of the inward grace that you have heard proclaimed here this morning. Look around you. You will see people who likely don't share your blood line, even remotely. Look around you and recognize brothers and sisters in Christ of God the Father.

But, if this is the truth, not propaganda, then we must invite scrutiny and criticism. Is this the truth of the Church? Will people accuse us of not living out the Gospel and retreating into the old model of what family used to be? Do many of us still privilege bloodlines above God's action in Christ? Do many of us still find ourselves opposed to our children over God's blessing, forcing them to follow our cultural and ethnic approach to what we have known?

Even our larger church family can err. The author Annie Rice returned to the church of here childhood only to find that it was simply a dysfunctional human family, not what the Gospel has enabled it to be.

Yes, there are challenges that remain. But, thanks be to God that each of us, brother and sister, helps us to keep on track by reminding us that our family is much broader. We see this in activities such as *Place to Go*, in the Christmas dinner, and in the church picnic yesterday. We are here inviting people who may have had good human families, or bad human families, into a new kind of family, one that God has re-created to bless all who come into the world.

And I believe that the main reminder that we all need to have is of how it is that we do so, brothers and sisters, sons and daughters of God, through the saving death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God's own unbegotten Son, made flesh for our sakes. He is the one who welcomes all broken lives because it is his family. And He is the one who transforms us all into world changing disciples so that we can be a blessing to others.

Glittering generalities? No, my friends, this is the wonderful and challenging truth of the Gospel.