

Darleen Pryds

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Swedenborgian Church of San Francisco

Luke 12:49-56

Summer's Over

There are lots of signs that summer is just about over. For one, students are arriving back at the university where I teach. Then a couple weeks ago when Rev. Jeff asked me to preach and I read the Gospel passage for today, I knew my summer leisure had ended. And then the sure sign of summer's end is when you get home from vacation.

My husband, Scott, and I just got back late last week from a lovely vacation driving up the coast to Mendocino then on up to the Redwoods. Every day was filled with breath taking sites and good quality time together. For me the vacation was extra special since we followed the same route my family took on one of our most memorable vacations back in about 1972. So I'll admit that Scott had to hear me say, "Oh I remember Trees of Mystery!" "Oh I remember that tree you can drive through!" "Oh I remember the Lady Bird Johnson grove!" It filled me with nostalgia to see all these sites again since that vacation way back when had been such a great one.

But when we actually drove through the Chandler tree, or drove by Trees of Mystery, or hiked through the Redwood grove, I fell silent sometimes since I suddenly had a visceral memory of other aspects of our vacation: my siblings and I had argued with our dad since he wouldn't pay the fee to drive through the Chandler tree. I fought with one of my sisters in the parking lot of the Trees of Mystery. And I whined about the bone chilling fog when we walked around the Redwood grove..."I've seen Redwood trees in Oakland. Let's go back to the car," I

probably said. “Your father drove us all the way, young lady, and we’re going to walk the entire trail,” mom snipped back.

Family vacations can be this way....full of both fun that we tend to remember fondly, but filled with many, many moments of division. Families know how to push each other’s buttons, and on a family vacation, when you’re with each other 24/7 for a week to 10 days, buttons start getting pushed with some frequency. But we usually don’t like to talk about this stuff. We usually don’t want to admit that all is not tranquil on the family front....or in our churches.

Given our Gospel reading for today, on one level you could say that my family was just living out the Gospel life when there was tension and conflict!

Jesus said, “Do you think I came here to bring peace to the earth? No I tell you, but rather division. From now on five in one household will be divided, three against two, and two against three; they will be divided father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother....”

I know, Jesus was talking about more important things than family road trips and cranky kids. But he did know how families could push each others’ buttons. He was a shrewd observer of human psychology and human relationships. He knew that the tough choices he was offering people would lead to conflict within families. But I don’t think he was promoting this conflict, *per se*. When people in relationships of any kind have important decisions to make (and not so important decisions! To make) conflict often happens.

So today I'd like to explore with you this very real Christian reality of living with division. To explore this Gospel passage, let's first look at an image.



(<http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/works-of-art/17.190.49>)

Who do you think this is?

We're starting with this image of the Blessed Virgin Mary for a couple of reasons. Apart from today being a big Marian Feast Day in the catholic church, this image is important for us to start with because it highlights the belligerence that has deeply steeped into the Christian tradition. You may remember that Matthews's version (10:34) of this passage from Luke has a slightly different wording....a wording that many Christians remember over Luke's wording: "I have not come to bring peace, but a sword." Both the passage from today's gospel in Luke and its parallel passage in Mathew seem to support and even promote a faith in which hostility and belligerence are accepted. This image of Mary dressed as a warrior, albeit a reluctant one reinforces the war that many Christians throughout the history of the Church have believed they must righteously wage. In history we see this with the Crusades during the Middle Ages; the persecution of religious martyrs on all sides during the 16th century Reformations; and in the brutally imposed conversions through colonization starting in the early modern period. The Christian faith has been promoted through real, physical, bloody combat through its history.

Today the vestiges of this belligerent form of faith continue. We can turn on the news at any moment to get the most recent rendition: should a mosque be allowed to be built at ground zero? Should all people be allowed to marry?

Is this the faith we choose to adhere to? One that promotes violence, abusive coercion, and hostility?

I actually don't think this is what Jesus had in mind when he said he said he came to bring division...even if Matthew had the wording more accurate with the word "sword." I don't

think Jesus here was actively teaching and promoting a violent or divisive response to his teachings.

Instead, I think Jesus was aware that his teachings would be received in a way that would divide families and could inspire violence. He understood that his religious leadership and his revolutionary new way that he was teaching would bring about division in families, and would even bring about violence...but his direct intention was not to promote this division or violence. He was offering people a brand new choice in faith that circumvented traditions and time-honored rules; such a choice necessarily tore families apart and continues to do so. [cf. to the scene in Martin Scorsese's film, *The Last Temptation of Christ*, in which Jesus is speaking to a group of people about peace and love, and the crowd jumps on one point he makes about helping the poor and takes it as a call to violent rebellion.]

So I think this statement of Jesus has possibly been misunderstood and misused. Jesus taught a faith based on love and forgiveness AND he knew his teachings would be received with conflict and division. Division happens when choices need to be made. If you live within a family or as a member of this church family or any other church community, you probably have experienced that one reality of living in relationships is that people disagree on decisions about just about anything, from what to have for dinner to how to live out a religious faith.

How do we live with these disagreements, these divisions that Jesus acknowledged would erupt between us?

This brings me to the second reason we started off with an image of the Blessed Virgin Mary. I teach at a Roman Catholic seminary, and I have students of various denominations and

faiths in my classes on spirituality and devotional practices. Through the years, I have come to accept that any teaching I do on the Virgin Mary will bring up lots of issues for people. Students have become volatile, they have become dismissive, they have become angry, they have become bored, and some have either walked out or have planned ahead of time to miss class because they have issues about her. In short, the Blessed Virgin Mary pushes peoples' buttons.

I brought in this image of Mary to push some buttons...how did you feel in your body when you were told it was Mary? What thoughts came to your mind?

The figure of the Virgin Mary is a good example of a religious tradition that people have a lot of issues around. I brought in an image of her because I wanted you to experience in your body and in your head the issues you bring to her...what pushes your buttons about the BVM? What hooks you into an auto-pilot reaction about her? By bringing this image in, I was hoping you would experience right here and now, what Tibetan Buddhists call "shenpa."

Among Tibetan Buddhists use the term shenpa to refer to this hook or this experience of having your buttons pushed ...sometimes it's translated as "attachment" it is better translated as "hooked". Pema Chodron, the famous Buddhist teacher, talks about shenpa in some of her retreats and books.

Shenpa is that feeling you get in the pit of your stomach or the tightening in your chest when someone offends you or disturbs you to the core...when someone pushes your buttons and you automatically react without thought or will. You might roll your eyes, you might fly off the cuff in anger; you might leave the room.

Pema Chodron writes: “In terms of shenpa itself, there’s the tightening that happens involuntarily, then there’s the urge to move away from it in some habitual way, which is usually initially in the mind, and it’s something you say to yourself about them...[the other person]. Usually it’s accompanied by [a] bad feeling. In the West, it is very, very common at that point to turn it against yourself: something is wrong with me. [I would add that in the West there is similarly a tendency to turn it against the other person or people involved: there is something wrong with them. We turn to judgment.]

This habitual movement to react cultivates discord and disharmony in any community or in any relationship...this is true even when the reaction is to leave....to escape the discomfort of a situation.

This is the kind of discord I would suggest that Jesus had in mind. This shenpa that family members experience out of their real concern for one another which often results in trying to control one another.

In Jesus’ words, 3 members of the family choose to become his followers and 2 members choose to remain Jews or followers of the Roman gods, what results? Shenpa.

Shenpa results in a family when a daughter chooses to become Swedenborgian when the parents are Roman Catholic; shenpa occurs when a church family experiences when a long time member leaves the parish.

These are gut reactions, the spontaneous arguments or attempts to coerce someone to change their decisions: these spontaneous reactions to the shenpa cause division that Jesus knew would occur. But is there another response?

What Pema Chodron speaks of as an antidote and what I think lies at the heart of what Swedenborg writes about concerning the spiritual realm is the need to stay; to stay with the discomfort; to notice the shenpa arise in you; to be aware of urges to judge, to flee, to react...and to stay...to stay with the process of differences.

Staying without giving in to the urge to react is no easy feat and requires practice. It doesn't mean becoming a doormat to the wills of anyone around you. It does mean becoming aware of the process. Jesus himself was aware that most of the people he spoke to would be unable to stay without judging, to stay without reacting...this is the division he knew his teachings would cause.

In the end I think we don't need to accept division as the only outcome of Jesus' teachings even if division is perhaps the most common outcome. Naturally, this exploration of shenpa just touches the surface of the wisdom of this Buddhist teaching. Pema Chodron's exploration of Shenpa is particularly rich and warrants further study and practice. But her teachings are a good starting place to begin on the one hand reconciling Jesus' matter of fact acceptance of the division his teachings would bring and on the other the world many of us want to live in today: in relationships that are loving and respectful; in a parish that is vibrant and fresh; and in a world of peace and harmony.