

Divided households

Proper 20C - August 17, 2025

I have been enjoying our trip through the Old Testament prophets these last few weeks. Amos, Hosea, and now Isaiah have been trying to tell the people of the kingdoms of Israel and Judah to stay faithful to the teachings of God, or suffer the consequences. The people of Israel didn't, and they got carried off to captivity by the Assyrians. The people of Judah are being equally difficult, and – spoiler alert – they are going to get carried off to Babylon.

God makes those poor prophets use every possible way to get through to the people. Hosea had to marry a temple prostitute, and today we have Isaiah turning a wedding song on its head.

In Isaiah's time it was usual to sing rather suggestive songs at wedding feasts – songs like you find in the Song of Solomon in the Bible. Full of fertility imagery, to encourage the young couple in their task of ensuring the continuity of the human race.

A scene occurred to me.

“Mother, you aren't going to invite crazy Uncle Isaiah to the wedding, are you? He's just going to spoil it by nagging us about God.”

“We really have to invite him, dear. But don't worry, we'll put him in the back corner and give him lots of wine and he'll just fall asleep.”

But he didn't, and the song he sang turns out to be about God's disappointment in the vineyard – the people of Judah – that yielded rotten grapes. He's going to tear it out and give up on it, because

he expected justice, but saw bloodshed;
righteousness, but heard a cry

Today's readings are tough, aren't they. What did you think of the Gospel? Where is our sweet, loving Jesus?

I came to bring fire to the earth...

Do you think that I came to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division.

That's hard to hear, especially now when there is so much division in the world around us. Luke's gospel was addressed to people in the struggling early Christian community who were suffering separation from their families and friends. And it would be easy for them – and for us, too – to assume moral superiority because of their faith.

When I hear Jesus saying, "They will be divided, father against son and mother against daughter..." I can't help thinking of our friend Dave.

Dave grew up in a closed religious community, a community of "peculiar people" who kept themselves separate from the world around them. Children went to school until they were 15, then were expected to work on the farm.

But Dave was different. He was gifted in science and mathematics, loved studying, and wouldn't quit school. When he insisted on going back to finish high school his parents packed his possessions in a cardboard box and told him to find a new home.

He eventually received a PhD in metallurgy. He married a fine woman, and they had two lovely children, a boy and a girl. They were happy and fulfilled, except that he couldn't bring his family home to meet his parents.

They'd travel to that part of the world to look around, and he'd drop his parents a note and ask them to meet him, but they never

showed up. And when he tried to go through the community's gate it would be shut in his face.

He went back to his home community twice, for the funerals of his parents. And when he was there everyone turned their backs on him.

You'd think he'd learn from that pain, wouldn't you? But then his daughter turned up at our door. "My dad says he's never going to speak to me again," she said. "He won't return my calls, and he won't answer my letters."

"Why, what happened?" we asked.

"I told him I'm a lesbian. I'm very happy with my new partner and I want to bring her home to meet him, but he won't have anything to do with us. He says we're disgusting sinners."

Oh Dave. You of all people should have known.

But that's not the end of the story. Years later Dave developed severe dementia. His daughter took him into her home and cared for him as long as she could, then visited him daily in the nursing home. She was by his bedside when he died.

Dave didn't get it, but his daughter sure did.

Dave and his parents used Jesus' message of unrest and division in families to justify their actions. What they heard Jesus saying was this: "When one of your family stubbornly refuses to follow my Way you must cut them out from among you, because it's better for you to lose a son or daughter than to give up your place in the Kingdom of Heaven."

You hear that all the time – we must harden our boundaries, not give in to the world's pressures, abandon friends and family rather than Christ.

Jesus was not advocating division, but predicting it. He knew humanity too well. He knew how we love to judge each other and form into hostile groups based on those judgements. We forget that the only person qualified to judge us is Jesus Christ himself, based on his commandments: love God with everything we are, and love our neighbours as ourselves.

But I keep coming back to the image of the vineyard. Healthy grapevines, full of connections. What would have made Isaiah's vineyard healthy? Justice and righteousness is what God expected. And justice and righteousness grow when we realize that we are connected to each other and to the world around us. We live a righteous life when we work towards carrying out God's will for the world, our neighbours, and ourselves, and we seek justice for others when we realize that we are all intimately connected.

Next week we will be celebrating our connection with both the past of this church and with our neighbours.

The author of the letter to the Hebrews, a great sermon to an unknown Jewish congregation, writes about the heroes of the Jewish faith who have gone before – some of them not all that saintly, but all fitting into God's purpose.. And he says, "Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses..." we should take heart and find courage to run past the point where we can run no more, break through the wall, and get into the zone where we can run forever

We are surrounded by a cloud of witnesses, the people who have gone before us who built this church and kept it going through good and bad times. Next week we're going to name them, thank them, and ask for their prayers.

And we are going to invite our neighbours to join a party on our parking lot and share our celebration. We are connected to our neighbours, to our friends who work with us in the food bank and hot lunches – and that connection makes our vineyard grow.

Jesus talks about bringing fire to the earth; the psalmist pleads with God to stop the fire that's burning the precious vineyard. In this season of wildfires it's easy to connect with images of the destructive power of fire. But those who are used to living close to the wilderness know there's more to it than that. Fire can be the source of life. There are trees whose cones will only open in the heat of a wildfire. The years after a fire the burned-over land is ablaze again with the shocking pink of fireweed and the bright lime green of baby trees.

We need fire within us: the purifying fire of the passion for justice and righteousness, for connection with each other, those we love, and the world around it.

May our connections grow strong and life-giving. Connections with each other, with our friends and neighbours, with the cloud of witnesses surrounding us, and with our loving God.

Amen.