Trinity Janesville – Fr. David Couper
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In our Gospel today we heard Jesus say: *"Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword... For I have come to set a man against his father and a daughter against her mother... and one's foes will be members of one's own household..."* (Matthew 10)

French film screenwriter and director Christian Carion released a film in 2005 based on the "fraternization" that went on during World War I, Christmas Eve, 1944 when French, Scottish and German soldiers left their trenches and walked into "no man's land" where they took a break from the fighting, sang Christmas carols, buried their dead and played a game of soccer.

As one can imagine, the general officers weren't too happy about this breach in the war.

It is a both a striking and disturbing movie, especially how the Christian church was portrayed. There is a sermon, preached by the Archbishop of York, in the movie that the director, in an interview, claims is true.

In it, the Archbishop uses this same text we heard this morning to legitimize the war; to legitimize the killing of not only German soldiers, but their children and families as well. "Your job," he tells the troops, "is to kill Germans...because they are different from us..."

This, of course, is not a new religious theme in the world. People have heard the same thing down through the ages, "God is on our side, not theirs!" We can hear it even today. "THEY" are different from us. THEIR family values are not our family values. THEY don't believe in the same God as we do." And so on.

We, along with Jews and Muslims, are called "people of the Book" because we share much of the Bible together. And when you are a "people of the Book" it is sometimes quite easy to read the scriptures to your point of view. And today's gospel is a good example.

Is Jesus really promoting war in this text – justifying conflict and the use of the “sword?” Or is he speaking and teaching about entirely something else?

We call Jesus the “Prince of Peace,” but based on this morning's gospel, and a narrow reading, he perhaps could be called the “Prince of Discord and War!”

Our lectionary readings are designed to help us get at what God is trying to say to us. In our first reading from Genesis today we hear another story of conflict. Abraham has two women in his life: Sarah and Hagar. Hagar is the first to bear Abraham a son. And Sarah is jealous and doesn't like it. She forces Abraham to throw Hagar and Ishmael out into the barren wilderness -- surely to die!

Ishmael is lost and is crying. Hagar is terrified. But God hears both their voices. God intervenes and saves them and PROMISES Hagar that Ishmael is to be the founder of a great nation.

While Abraham separates and casts out, God saves and restores.

Sarah births Isaac – and he becomes the nation and people of Israel. And Ishmael becomes the people of the Arab world.

But our lectionary doesn’t stop here. We go on and hear St Paul’s letter to the Romans. Jesus the man of hope. In him we are to become “alive in God!” We are to have New lives. Our “old selves” are to be crucified with him so that we will be raised to this NEW LIFE in Jesus Christ.

God knows our penchant for separation – our love of tribalism (which, by the way, I believe is the single-most dangerous ethic in the world today). We have seen the deadly effects of tribalism in both our World Wars, and we have recently seen it in the horrendous death, destruction and continuing enmity in Rwanda, Bosnia, the Sudan, and throughout the Middle East!

But we are not to despair. We are a people of hope. Hope is one of the most important and prevalent values in our religious ethic. And the hope to which we are called is Jesus! And the prophetic vision of God is not separation, but UNITY.

This is clear in the OT prophecy of Joel (2:28-29):

“Later, I will give my Spirit to <u>everyone</u>.
Your sons and daughters will prophesy.
Your old men will have dreams,
and your young men will see visions.
In those days I will even give my Spirit to my servants,
both men and women.”

And reinforced by St Paul in Galatians (3:28):

“There is neither Jew nor Greek,
slave nor free,
male nor female,
for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”

Jesus was raised with the Torah and the teachings of the prophets – most of whom proclaimed not God's separateness, but God's unity among all people.

Jesus calls us to break out of our narrow tribal categories and to become ONE in God.

What Jesus is saying today in the hyperbolic preaching style of the first century is that when you decide to follow him, take on this New Life, and his values and vision, you may be ostracized by not only your tribe but also your family.

Today, we live in a much smaller world than any of the biblical prophets lived. We have not only become a global community, but a global “neighborhood.” Yet we act like we are separate and that others have less value in the world than we do as we disproportionately consumer the finite resources of the world, look disdainfully on sharing our power, and create more and more sophisticated weapons to enforce our way on the rest of the world.

When I hear the words of Jesus in Matthew 10, I hear them as words that will support and prepare me when I come up against human systems that tend to divide us and not bring us together. The ethic of Jesus (“in whom,” St Paul tells us in Colossians, “the fullness of God was pleased to dwell...”) will cause discord among the tribes of the world if their way is not God’s way.

Jesus brings to us a deeper God, a more hopeful God, a God that yearns for us to get along – a God pre-figured by the prophet Isaiah who wants us to turn our "swords into plowshares!"

The story of a smaller, heavily armed, separated world, struggling for limited resources will not have a happy ending. Separation, distance, and "them v. us" thinking leads to our destruction. It is simply not God's way.

The story of a world committed to preserving its ecology, sharing resources, and solving problems without violence is God's dream for us. God does not see difference between us but rather sees that imprint that was put on each one of us at our creation – the image of God which resides in every human being.

Jesus calls each one of us to a new and abundant life. All we need is the hope and the will to accept his call and the courage to withstand the conflict that this can create – even in our own families.

The gospel is a sign of hope for the world as long as we Christians work to be a bridge and not a barrier to the rest of the world. A Jew is imprinted with God's image, so are Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists – even those without faith still have God's imprint.

Jesus tells us this is not easy... when we step out to follow him there will be trouble. Jesus knew this.

So, he calls us to find our life in him.

In the midst of the carnage of the trench fighting of World War I, a few men found more similarities than differences and stepped out in faith to celebrate that Holy Night in 1914. It was a bold move. Afterwards, they were called traitors and fraternizers, even collaborators.

But each one of them that night, as they entered into and closed that dangerous space between them called "no man's land," stepped closer to the Kingdom of God.

AMEN.