

Do you like to watch mysteries on PBS? One of my favorites is Grantchester – the show involves a Church of England priest who helps his detective friend solve crimes. Based on today's Gospel lesson, we have a sort of mystery on our hands. And I, as your priest, will help uncover the clues.

Let's start with the body. The setting is this: I grew up in a friendly Episcopal church. We loved and supported each other. A high school friend grew up in a Mormon family. When we were both in college I ran into her at the mall during break. Because of some lifestyle choice she had made, she had been kicked out of her family and also college. She was adrift. This was my first introduction to the malignant side of today's Gospel – Jesus saying the following:

“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 a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and one's foes will be members of one's own household. 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; and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.”

Her family kicked her out because, in their religious tradition, Jesus brought a sword and has set daughter against mother. I honestly did not know this could happen in a family or in one's own religion, but, here was the proof that I could not ignore. From that time onward, I have been a magnet to people and families who have been harmed by organized religion.

Like any good murder mystery, it helps when there are more bodies. Unfortunately, there are.

I have baptized adults; some of whom have been kicked out of the religion of their family and subsequently their family has “shunned” them. For one such person, the shunning extended to their small rural town – they lost their social network as well as a meaningful place to work.

One of my clergy mentors, Bill, told me a heartbreaking story from the early 1980s. There was a man dying in the passenger seat of his VW bug. He had AIDS. His family had excluded him, he lost his job, his circle of friends abandoned him, his Church was long gone, and no shelter would dare take him in. He had nowhere else to go but his car. Bill sat in the driver's seat of the bright yellow car and offered the man last rites. This man's family had kicked him out after he came out to them.

Now for the evidence.

I prefer to think that Bible is a collection of stories that are intertwined with each other. For instance, a well-known Bible verse is sung and said during Advent – Isaiah 9:  
For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

We attribute these words with the Messiah – both the oratorio by Handel and Jesus himself. We believe Jesus is the Wonderful Counsellor, the Prince of Peace. How can the Prince of Peace also say that he has not brought peace but a sword? How can we compare this to he who said he has set son against father?

For starters, we have to understand the literary concept of juxtaposition – two things being placed close together with contrasting effect. Juxtaposition is saying: a river in a time of dryness; a harbor in the tempest. [Lyrics to *All I Want is You* by U2] This is a common literary style in Jesus' day and before. In fact, one commentary I read indicated that rabbinic literature two hundred years before Jesus was born used juxtaposition that they called "light and heavy." We see that usage in the Book of Psalms. In particular, Psalm 84 is as follows: *Even the sparrow finds a home near your altar*. The idea here is that if God makes even a sparrow – light – to have room at God's altar, imagine the place saved for us – heavy – at the altar. Rabbinic literature (what the rabbis were writing about) in Jesus' day used juxtaposition. I believe Jesus used it too and those who listened to him understood it as simply that.

Peace, in Jesus' day, was found at the end of the sword of the Roman Empire. If one didn't speak up or cause trouble, there would be peace. That's not the peace that Jesus was bringing. He brought freedom and inner peace by knowing that we are loved and forgiven and that we can love one another and forgive one another. Juxtaposition. He is the Prince of Peace.

And now, for the most difficult phrase: *I have come to set children against their parents*. Going back into the Bible, here is a passage from the prophet Micah. (7:9)

For the son treats the father with contempt, the daughter rises up against her mother, the daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; your enemies are members of your own household.

Sound familiar; almost word-for-word attributed to Jesus but Micah said this at least 600 years before Jesus was born. Many theologians believe these words were used to indicate how bad things would be before the Messiah comes. One way to look at this passage is to hear Jesus saying that that time has come – not to divide but that he is the Messiah. Another way to look at it is by reading the next verse: ... daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; your enemies are members of your own household. [next verse] But as for me, I will look to the Lord, I will wait for the God of my salvation; my God will hear me.

Juxtaposition. Even though all things are falling apart, even the nuclear family, but, *as for me, I will wait for the God of my salvation*. Light/heavy, juxtaposition, whatever you want to call it, I think Jesus was calling the time he was living in was the time of the Messiah and that all those who were waiting for the God of their salvation, their time has come. What the Prince of Peace was NOT calling for was for us to divide our own families based on religiosity. He was not saying to shun, reject, kick-out fathers or mothers or daughters or sons.

This being said, there are times, when abuse is occurring, when separations must occur. Jesus is not saying to stay in an abusive situation either. He'd be the first to tell you to turn and run.

Speaking of that, the last part of this passage is also troubling if not read as juxtaposition. Jesus said:

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; and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me.

If you had a friend, a person of romantic interest, a business partner, or a pastor say to you the following: you must love me more than your parents and more than your children. I'd say it is time to run out of that relationship, quick! Those are toxic words. So why does Jesus use them.

There is an ancient Christian practice of baptism that when the priest baptizes the child, he hands the child back to the parents with these words: this is a child of God who is on loan to you. On loan. We recently celebrated Mother's Day and last week Father's Day. Many of us, me included, know that our dads are given to us on loan. We don't get to keep them for our entire lives. There is one relationship, however, that is with us before we are in the cradle and will be with us past the grave – our relationship with God. That is not on loan. That is the permanent relationship. Jesus time and time again invites us to focus on things that last, not things that are on loan. The world wants us to focus on things perishable, or passing away, but Jesus wants us to focus on our relationship with God.

Here is how I have come to see Jesus in family life. Jesus is the love, the bond, the peace, the acceptance, the forgiveness, the one common factor in our family lives together. Jesus bring us together, in peace, in forgiveness, in unity. I have seen it over and over again in pastoral ministry. He is the Prince of Peace. When son is set against father, Jesus and the power of the Holy Spirit, is the one factor that can heal broken relationships and bring peace.

Back to my clergy mentor, Bill, and the young man dying in his Volkswagen. Bill got the name and phone number the man's parents. He called them, introduced himself, and said their son has just received last rites and is dying in his car because he has nowhere to go. That day, they quickly retrieved their son, took him in, and he died with love and forgiveness in his family and in his heart.

This type of love and peace is not going to make a good mystery on PBS, but, it is the love, the relationship, the peace and joy that we have running with and through us our entire lives. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.