

Sunday, August 18, 2013: Luke 12:49-56

by [Robert C. Saler](#) in the [August 7, 2013](#) issue

The most pernicious theological temptation is projection. As grand “masters of suspicion” such as Ludwig Feuerbach, Marx, Nietzsche and Freud have reminded us, we Christians often read the Bible within a specific cultural context and then impose the standards of that context onto the God of the Bible. What begins with a children’s sermon that conveys (perhaps unintentionally) that the point of the incarnation is Jesus telling us to be nice to each other, culminates in a sermon that portrays Jesus as a comfortable purveyor of contemporary sensibilities. While a domesticated portrayal may seem more benevolent than a fire-and-brimstone sermon that presents Jesus as the agent of God’s wrathful judgment, it is no less hollow.

The truth is that the scriptures offer us a Jesus who names hard realities in hard terms. I used to hate this fact about the Bible. I used to have little appreciation for the presence of these disturbing passages. It took me a long time to realize that description is not prescription—and that because Jesus says something does not mean that the content of his statement is automatically a good thing. “Scriptural” does not always mean “right.” Part of the genius of scripture is that it names realities about our lives that are often very wrong.

We have a sense of what it meant for Jesus in his time to say that his presence on earth would bring a sword of division to his followers, one that would force the disciples and the early Christians to make excruciatingly difficult decisions about a discipleship that would put them at odds with the structures around them—government, religion and even family. Behind these words in Luke is the emerging vision of martyrdom in Christian communities, as Luke’s own later narrative of Stephen’s stoning would attest. We have no reason to think that Jesus is blessing this reality; he is only naming it.

Two thousand years later we know the sadder ironies behind Jesus’ words. The followers who took on the name of the Christ have brought more swords into the world—whether through medieval crusades or contemporary justifications of violence against those on “the wrong side.” In many of the violent acts perpetrated

by Christians, Jesus' words of violence have been invoked as prescriptive.

As the 19th- and 20th-century debates over the "historical Jesus" show, it is as tempting to dismiss such difficult passages as irrelevant to a more enlightened time. But we must avoid projection and recognize that because the Jesus of the Bible is not identical to the one that we would have fashioned for ourselves, we have a safeguard against conceptual idolatry.

The Bible names reality in unsparing terms. The theology of the incarnation tells us that Jesus inhabits this reality without reservation, even unto death. But our world is ruled by a host of realities that the incarnation does not bless; naming one of these is often a preface to judgment instead of blessing. The fact that naming judgment happens on terms different from those we might craft may be key to their salvific character.

When we are at our best and most confident, we take solace in our ability to manage our calendars and our environments in ways that make sense to us. Stability and predictability are blessings in their own right, and we're right to value them. But they can't be trusted. Every day the news reminds us of this, and of a most painful reality: stability and clarity hang by a shoestring. An explosion, errant bullet, odd lump or overheard comment can throw us into chaos. Chaos can also come from the force of love in the face of tragedy, as when people at the Boston marathon ran toward the explosions in order to help. At such moments we are powerless to interpret the signs and times of our lives, much less do anything about them. Evil and love have the potential to shift the ground under our feet.

When the familiar has become ineffective and the quotidian has been ruptured beyond repair, it is the strange God of strange blessings that can save. The recipient of such salvation may well struggle—knowing with Mary what it means for a "sword to pierce the soul" (Luke 2:35)—and face honestly one's own complicity in bringing more swords into a world already cut to pieces. But as any recovering addict will attest, hard truths are the ground upon which real hope stands. Honesty about brokenness is a necessary preface to healing.

We live in a world of swords—some in our wallets, some in our words and some in our hearts—and the divisions among us are threatening. But the strange Savior who names brokenness is the horizon against which the inbreaking of God's salvation shines through. When it is violence that is familiar, it is God's peace that is odd enough to save us from that violence.