

August 18, Ordinary 20C (Luke 12:49-56; Jeremiah 23:23-29)

We preach the gospel of peace and justice. Are there divides between our words and actions?

by [Hardy Kim](#) in the [July 31, 2019](#) issue

How do we reconcile Jesus, the bearer of God's peace, with his passionate words about division—"son against father, mother against daughter"—in this week's Gospel reading?

In an essay in *Feasting on the Word*, biblical scholar Audrey West suggests we utilize "a symbolic interpretation in which the parent-child conflict represents the division within the self between the mind and the passions, as rational thought seeks to overpower the impulses of sin." While I don't believe that our rational minds should always be trusted to guide our faithfulness, I do think it is fruitful to examine the internal division that Jesus' call to discipleship inflicts on us all.

In the urban, cosmopolitan, and increasingly diverse areas I have lived, it is not at all a revolutionary thing to preach the gospel as a message about justice. Many mainline Christians take it as a given that Jesus' notion of peace involves lifting people out of real-world oppression and poverty, that his peace is opposed to dehumanizing ideologies of misogyny, homophobia, and racism. Yet even as we preach messages about Jesus' peace, others might wonder at our personal and institutional practices, noticing the cracks of division between our words and our actions. "The hardest thing in the world," writes Goethe, "is to act in accordance with your thinking."

I serve a congregation in the greater San Francisco Bay Area of Northern California. "The economy here is booming," writes Farhad Manjoo in a recent *New York Times* column about this area, "but no one feels especially good about it. When the cost of living is taken into account, billionaire-brimming California ranks as the most poverty-stricken state, with a fifth of the population struggling to get by. Since 2010, migration out of California has surged." Perhaps the main point of pain and crisis is this: "The problems of affordable housing and homelessness have surpassed all

superlatives—what was a crisis is now an emergency that feels like a dystopian showcase of American inequality.”

Manjoo laments how leaders of the state’s Democratic Party—a party with which many mainline Christians align themselves—have repeatedly failed to live up to the promise of peace embodied by racially and economically diverse communities. In this most recent episode, a statewide bill that would have rezoned neighborhoods to allow for higher density and mixed-income housing along major transit routes was sabotaged by a legislator who worried that an influx of people might, in Manjoo’s words, “alter the character of enclaves like his.” For Manjoo this displays “the refusal on the part of wealthy progressives”—and, I would add, mainline Christians—“to live by the values they profess to support at the national level,” the progressive values embodied by dense, diverse cities.

When Jesus warns about his coming “peace,” it is easy for us to let this remain a comfortable mystery—by limiting it to the spiritual realm, or relegating it to a history in which Christians were persecuted or cast off from their families for their beliefs. Yet Jesus’ anger at the community is right in line with the tradition of the prophets, who called people out for worshiping God with their lips while failing God with their actions.

The reading from Jeremiah for this week might seem unrelated to Jesus’ message. Jeremiah primarily rails against false prophets who lead the people astray. But the comfortable complacency of the false prophets and the people connects Jeremiah’s targets to Jesus’ listeners:

How long? Will the hearts of the prophets ever turn back—those who prophesy lies, and who prophesy the deceit of their own heart? . . . Let the prophet who has a dream tell the dream, but let the one who has my word speak my word faithfully. What has straw in common with wheat? says the Lord. Is not my word like fire, says the Lord, and like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces?

This passage continues a diatribe against the leaders of Jerusalem that begins with a call for them to “act with justice and righteousness” (Jer. 22:3). The promise of God’s peace for the people has always come with the expectation that the people participate in *making peace*. This challenge was ever a part of Jesus’ being, of whom John the Baptist says, “One who is more powerful than I is coming . . . His winnowing

fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire” (Luke 3:16-17).