Slaying the hobgoblins

by Garret Keizer in the August 1, 2001 issue

Though I eventually left the Reformed Church in which I was raised, I did so with a debt of gratitude, most notably for one rather conservative pastor who had met my youthful rebellions with untiring patience. I entered the soft light of his study one evening having found “a contradiction” in one of Paul’s epistles, which I held up to him in disgust like the fabled finger joint that undiscriminating restaurant patrons are sometimes said to find in their soup. He responded by pointing out several others I had missed. “So there are contradictions,” he said gently, with a trace of Dutch accent in his voice. “But taken as a whole, I think it’s a good epistle.”

Were we to meet today, my former minister would no doubt be amused at the great value I place on the contradictions in scripture. His “holistic” approach obviously had a lasting influence. I can even fancy myself setting up practice as a homeopathic healer of exegetical ailments, prescribing the yin of one hard passage in order to balance the yang of another, and urging my patients to treat any seeming contradiction as a Zen koan that promises benefits beyond the either/or of logical categories.

The passage from Luke in which Jesus asks, “Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth?” would be one of my most recommended remedies. It instantly raises an objection. Isn’t it also in Luke that the angels sing at Christ’s nativity about “Peace on earth”? What’s going on?

Of course, it may be foolish to assume that the two references to peace present an irreconcilable contradiction. When Jesus answers his own rhetorical question by saying, “No, I tell you, but rather division!” he may be pointing out nothing more contradictory than the fact that some conflict must arise before there can be genuine peace. Or perhaps he is speaking of social peace, whereas the angels were singing about “spiritual” peace.

For my part, however, I actually prefer to take this passage as a deliberate contradiction of the “Peace on earth” anthem, and indeed, Jesus seems to invite us to. “Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth?” he challenges, as if

we may have good reason to think that he has, as if we may have heard somewhere about what the angels were supposed to have sung above Bethlehem. Jesus seems to be defying his own reputation—that is, our definitions of his role. He leaves them empty in the grasp of our expectation, like Joseph's clothes in the clutches of Potiphar's wife. Yes, he has come to fulfill the law, but he will still heal on the Sabbath. Yes, he has come to teach nonviolence, but he will cleanse the temple precincts with a whip. Yes, his soul will be sorrowful "even unto death," but he will rise from death. Emerson said, "A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds." It was apparently the hobgoblin of my adolescent mind. But Jesus comes not only to set fire to the earth, but also to slay the hobgoblins. And he invites us to free ourselves by doing the same.

Which brings us to another difficult question raised by this Sunday's Gospel: What if one of the "hobgoblins" turns out to be, well, Mom? Grant it that Jesus is refusing to be straitjacketed in anyone's narrow expectation; grant it that he's showing us the liberating power of the gospel and all of that—we're still left with a rather dismal prediction here. Jesus is talking about something much more radical than the understandable struggle between persons of faith and the "powers and principalities." "From now on five in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three; they will be divided: father against son and son against father . . ." If this is "good news," where is the good in it?

Perhaps in another equally "intolerable" verse, also found in the Gospel of Luke. In any case, that is the verse this homeopath would prescribe: "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you." We have read that verse, some of us, and thought: "Woe is me." We have read the verse about divisions in the household and thought the same thing. But reading the two together effects a wonderful realization. Our enemies are not usually the bloodthirsty motorcycle marauders of our imaginations, but people much closer to home. They include the husband who grows resentful because of all the time you're spending at hospice, the child who grows resentful because you will not let him have a gun, the parent who grows resentful because you've decided not to join the church on the basis of a few measly contradictions in St. Paul!

This is an old insight, of course—as old as the domestic catastrophes of classical Greek drama. But for many Christians it may amount to a new insight: Charity begins at home precisely because the fire that Jesus came to kindle on earth often begins there as well. And it begins there, in part, because the people we wed or

gave birth to while angels sang “Peace on earth” above our bowers are free to grow beyond their roles and beyond our expectations. Just as Jesus did, in other words.

But that is only half the insight. I am commanded to love these domestic enemies. That is indeed good news. It says that I need not be afraid of my inability to “love my enemies,” because often I love them already; and I need not fear if my enemies are those I’d prefer to love, because love is God’s preference—and commandment—also.