OF WHOM THE WORLD WAS NOT WORTHY

Did your mother ever tell you, as mine did, to stop fighting with your brother?
Have you ever felt exhausted because a relationship with someone at home or at work was filled with disagreements and frequent arguments?
Do you ever find yourself discouraged, asking perhaps even in church, “Why can’t people just get along?”?

If you have had any of those or similar experiences you will be puzzled or even astonished today to hear Jesus say, “Do you think I have come to bring peace to the earth?” (“Well,” we say, “that is what the Christmas angels promised, isn’t it?”) Jesus continues, “No, I tell you, [not peace] but division.”
What does Jesus mean by those words?
And if God is somewhere behind those words, what in the world is God doing?
Here’s what God is doing! **God is working in and through Jesus to create a community of people who are single-mindedly devoted to the rule of God in this world.** This community of people is so passionately committed to God’s kingdom of love and truth and justice that they are willing to get into arguments, come into conflict at work, at school, at church, and even at home.

When you think about it, God has been working at this single-minded community thing for a long time.
What is the very first commandment of the ten? **You shall have no other gods.** “Israel, you shall be a people single-minded in your devotion to Yahweh, the God who cares for and rescues the weak and the poor.”
Jesus ‘got it” and picked up the same theme. **“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart...soul...mind, and strength, and...your neighbor as yourself.”** Single-minded and single-hearted. “Christian disciples, in me you are free to be a community that loves God with your whole being, and loves your neighbors.” Jesus said, “**You cannot serve two masters... You cannot serve God and greed.**” Jesus rose from the dead to create a single-minded church, faithful to God as God is faithful in loving us.

**God is working in and through Jesus to create a community of people who are single-mindedly, passionately devoted to the rule of God in this world.** That is good news, because that kind of single-mindedness is healthy for us and for others.
But...single-mindedness can cause division.
Almost all the first Christians had been raised in the Jewish faith and community. Imagine you are a new Christian, a Jewish convert at the time Luke’s gospel was written. You come home to your family and say, “I have found this wonderful group of people. They are Jews, like us, but they follow a man named Jesus who loved our God and all people so much that he was willing to come into conflict with religious leaders and government leaders; he was willing to endure division and was eventually executed by people who got tired of arguing with him. His followers call themselves “church,” and they really practice what they preach; they sell all their possessions, pool the proceeds, and share with anyone who has need. They try to live out God’s love with each other. I want to be one of them! And I would like you to join this group, too!” If you came home and said that, what would your wife say, or your husband, or your parents? Would there be peace, or division?

How could being single-mindedly devoted to the God who cares for and rescues the weak and the poor get you into conflict at work? If your boss was cheating a customer or mistreating a co-worker, you would, as a single-minded God-lover, go to your boss and ask her to stop. Would there be peace or division at work? You cannot serve the God who rescues the weak and the god of keeping your job. Single-minded, not double-minded or triple-minded.

Single-mindedness can cause division. This world tends to fear single-mindedness. At least we sneeringly call such people “fanatics;” at worst we harass and eliminate them.

Today’s reading from Hebrews speaks of people of faith, Christ-followers single-mindedly devoted to the rule of God in this world who were willing to come into conflict with religion and government, and who suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned to death, sawn in two, they were killed by the sword; they went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, persecuted, tormented – of whom the world was not worthy.

And I think of German Lutheran pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer, imprisoned in Berlin and later in the concentration camp at Buchenwald where he was executed – all because he was single-mindedly devoted to the rule of God in this world, all because he spoke and acted against Hitler who was abusing the weak and poor whom God loves. In his prison cell Bonhoeffer wrote the stirring words of faith that we sing in today’s Hymn of the Day. Single-minded people of whom the world was not worthy.

Having long lived in fear of a god who judges harshly, Martin Luther came to know and love the God he met in Jesus and the pages of the Bible, the God of amazing grace and faithful, forgiving love for people.

Luther was so passionately, single-mindedly in love with this good news that he sat down and spelled out 95 ways in which the Pope and the church had gotten the good news all wrong!

There was, as you might have heard, division and bitter argument. Pope Leo called Fr.
Martin a “wild boar,” loose in the Lord’s vineyard (the church) and tearing it up. Luther called Pope Leo “the Prince of Darkness and the son of Satan himself.” Things got very nasty, but time has shown that it was important that Luther was willing to endure the division, was willing to single-mindedly stand for the gospel, the good news, for the heart of Christian faith was at stake.

At a critical time in our nation’s history President Lincoln was just as single-minded but less confrontational and more conciliatory than Luther. Lincoln believed that when he swore to “preserve, protect, and defend the Constitution of the United States of America” he had promised to preserve the united states, the union of states, to keep North and South together.

Lincoln was every bit as single-minded and passionate as Luther, but because he was single-mindedly committed to preserving the union, he used a very different approach. Lincoln’s single-mindedness brought him into conflict with single-minded abolitionists like William Lloyd Garrison and Harriet Beecher Stowe. They believed slavery was inhuman and immoral, and wanted the President to speak and take action against it. But Lincoln interpreted the present time (Jesus’ words in today’s gospel) and knew that to take such steps at that time, early in the Civil War, would destroy any hope of reconciliation between North and South after the war. Lincoln’s opponents, who were “right” that slavery was evil, accused the President of lacking compassion or courage or both. Lincoln endured the division and their accusations, and remained gracious and conciliatory toward the southern states even when it was clear they would be defeated in war.

In early 1865 in his second inaugural address this single-minded President spoke words like these: “Both (South and North) read the same Bible, and pray to the same God, and each invokes (God’s) aid against the other… The prayers of both could not be answered; that of neither has been answered fully… With malice toward none; with charity for all; with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right…let us strive…to bind up the nation’s wounds…”

When the time was right the issue of slavery was decided in a way much less costly to the relationship between the two parties. Time has shown that it was important that Lincoln took the more moderate, conciliatory approach and, even in victory, was not arrogant but gracious.

Today Jesus invites us to “interpret the present time.”

I don’t know if Jesus has brought the division and lack of peace and quiet to the church, or whether human arrogance has brought it, or if it has been some of each, but there certainly has been no lack of argument and division in the church over the years.

Churches have split over the issue of slavery, which the Bible in places says is OK. Churches have argued and divided over whether or not to ordain women as pastors. The Bible in places says this is a bad idea, though our Lutheran churches since 1970 have been discovering it is quite a good idea; and last Tuesday our Evangelical Lutheran Church in
America elected a woman, Bishop Elizabeth Eaton of the Northeastern Ohio Synod, as our first female Presiding Bishop. Bp. Eaton will take office in November. Churches have argued and divided over the full inclusion of homosexual people in the life of the church, which the Bible in places says is a bad idea.

Sometimes the arguments have been bitter and the divisions nasty. The accusations go back and forth: “Don’t you read the Bible?” “Don’t you have any of the compassion of Christ who welcomed all people?”

Today Jesus invites us to “interpret the present time.” But that is a difficult exercise.

Many unchurched younger and older people report they are turned off by the conflicts and divisions in the church. So maybe we should “mellow out.” But would that mean squelching our single-minded devotion to God’s rule of love and truth and justice in this world?

The average age in our churches is getting older and older. Young adults wonder why we fuss so much over issues like homosexuality. Perhaps we should become more progressive, get more in tune with “the spirit of the times,” and become more attractive to younger people. But if “the world is going to hell in a hand basket,” getting more in tune with “the spirit of the times” is the last thing we’d want to do.

What should we do?

We should remember what God is doing! Jesus tells us today with his warning words, “Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division.”

**God is working in and through Jesus to create a community of people who are single-mindedly devoted to the rule of God in this world.**

God is working to turn us into fanatics who are willing to endure some conflict, some discomfort for the sake of what God is doing in the world. Come to the Supper today and commune with people you disagree with, and with Jesus who was willing to endure the discomfort of the cross.

God is working to turn us into single-minded fanatics who love our enemies, who respect our opponents and, like Lincoln, treat them so. Come to the Supper today and commune with some people you disagree with, and with Jesus who prayed God’s forgiveness for those who opposed and killed him.

God is working to turn us into single-minded fanatics who believe that God really is working out God’s purposes for the church, even through conflicts and divisions. Come to the Supper today and commune with sisters and brothers in Christ, and with Christ who has come to fill us with his life, and make of us people of whom the world is not worthy.

Please join me in this reading.

It’s easy to say “yes” when it costs me nothing.
It’s easy to say “yes” when I don’t have to change a thing. It’s easy to say “yes” when everyone else is saying “yes,” too. It is harder to say “yes” when I have to give something up. It is harder to say “yes” when I have to change a little. It is harder to say “yes” when others look at me and shake their heads. It’s really hard to say “yes” when it might cost me everything. It’s really hard to say “yes” when I might suffer. It’s really hard to say “yes” when my friend denies me and turns away.

And yet, it is my God who gave me my everything. And it is my God who promises to stand with me, no matter what. And so, dear God, to you I say “yes.” Hear my word. “Yes.”