

Undone and Put Back Together

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Scripture: Luke 12:49-56

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When I was a child, my father insisted, after lunch, that all of us children had to take a nap. Most likely this had ulterior motives as my father would lie down and have his own nap, but neither me nor my sisters had any intention of falling asleep. One of the ways he would induce us to take a nap was by telling us stories. Basically, the stories he told were slightly abridged versions of stories we are probably all familiar with from the Hobbit and Lord of the Rings to the adventures of a brother and sister who had episodes very similar to his own childhood. One of the naptime stories I remember distinctly were what I called 'Boo Radley' stories in which he took bits and pieces of Harper Lee's novel *To Kill a Mockingbird* and distilled them into short naptime vignettes for the purpose of inducing us to relax and fall asleep. Yet many of these stories, especially the Boo Radley stories, had the opposite effect. What is going to happen next? Is Boo Radley scary? Will Jem and Scout and Dill ever see him? I believe the answer was something like, if you take a nap, maybe you will find out in tomorrow's story. Eventually, we graduated from naps and also grew to learn that these stories were not just about Boo Radley but a whole book we could read in the novel set in Maycomb, Alabama with many more characters that would captivate us all. So ingrained were some of the details of Harper Lee's novel in my own psyche that I remember dragging my own family to Monroeville, Alabama last summer, the real town where Harper Lee grew up and based the novel. On a late summer afternoon, we could be found driving around town trying to figure out how she must have walked home from school based on her vivid descriptions in the novel and looking around and wondering which house might have been where the reclusive Boo Radley lived.

As one who is still fascinated by all things *Mockingbird*, one of this summer's reading fare has been Joseph Crespino's book, *Atticus Finch: The Biography, Harper Lee, Her Father, and the Making of an American Icon*. One of the points Crespino makes in his book is that Atticus Finch was not quite the perfect flawless father figure we reflexively assume he was and should always be until Gregory Peck, in making the movie version, took the character from the novel, chiseled away any flaws or rough edges, lengthened Atticus' courtroom defense to be the central episode of the movie, and subtly transformed a coming of age childhood memoir in which the father played an important if less central supporting role to an account in which Atticus is the main character and featured hero of the whole story. *To Kill a Mockingbird* was not Harper Lee's first novel, but until 5-6 years ago, it was the only one she had ever published. Her first novel, *Go Set a Watchman*, was published in 2015 posthumously and with great controversial fanfare. For starters, she had never authorized its publication in her lifetime, so many questioned why suddenly

it was entering the public domain now. And perhaps more scandalous, the novel was set in her young adulthood years, not her childhood years, and depicted an Atticus Finch who was not an American icon and hero, but who supported segregation, had some white supremacist leanings, and while he still came across as noble, loving, and thoughtful, was not going to win Gregory Peck another academy award and tended to come across embarrassingly at times, more like Archie Bunker than the Atticus Finch of our hopes and dreams. And as sensational as it was for Harper Lee's first novel to finally be shared, because it depicted a more complicated and flawed Atticus Finch, no one liked it, others refused to read it, and after a brief year of frenzy and activity, it has faded into obscurity.

I wonder if we view God and Jesus in a similar manner. Content for the cookie cutter version to suffice, the version that is perhaps more pious and well behaved than we are, but who pretty much is a more dignified and moral version of ourselves writ large; still a middle-class, Caucasian first century version of ourselves, but with no flaws and a perfect report card, gracious and kind and never rattled or upset or imperfect in any way. A domesticated Jesus but played by Gregory Peck in the movie. But the more we try to read and understand and get a sense of Jesus in scripture, rather than finding a straightforward, domesticated, and neat and tidy Savior, we often get one who does not stay on message or even acts or says things or does the exact opposite of what we would expect him to, whether it comes in the form of welcoming prostitutes and other suspect characters, or choosing not to condemn treacherous tax collectors or members of the upper classes, or explaining without much success or comprehension that a Messiah is not going to save the world with an army or an AR-15, but through the use of a power more deep and robust and constructive than coercive and overwhelming right-handed power. Jesus can also come across as direct and rather harsh and anti-family and anti-establishment, like in today's lesson in which he states he has not come to bring peace to earth but division and to bring about division at our most fundamental relations, 'father against son, mother against daughter, mother-in-law against daughter-in-law,' well, maybe that one is not as surprising, but still, it is unnerving to hear the Jesus we have all grown up say that he has come to bring division and not just peace, to sow division and not just unity and peace.

It is not just here in Luke 12 that Jesus talks like this. In Matthew's gospel, right before he talks about the cost of discipleship, Jesus says 'do not think I have come to bring peace to 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 (there's that mother-in-law again), and one's foes will be members of one's own household.' (Matthew 10:34-36). Not exactly the Hallmark family values Jesus we thought we knew. And just in case you thought Mark's Jesus was not as complicated he refuses to make allowance for his own family members who are stuck outside when he is preaching and teaching and redefines kinship: 'who are my mother and brothers and

sisters? Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother' (Mark 3:31-35).

So, is Jesus another social assassination or anti-institutionalist who wants to burn it all down and tear down all the institutions and allow for an anything goes free range anarchist version of humanity? Is Jesus promoting a kind of disconnected existence in which we are not connected to family, community, and groups that give us a sense of identity and purpose in this world? I don't think that is what is meant by our passage, but I also don't think Jesus is a status quo go-along-to-get-along kind of Messiah either. In the letter to the Hebrews in the 4th chapter and 12 verse, the author describes the word of God as 'living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow, it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart' (Hebrew 4:12). There is a sense that the more deeply we get to know Jesus, the more layers and characteristics we encounter and experience, Jesus becomes less comfortable and more mysterious than we might otherwise wish for. This word of God encounters us not just as a peaceful easy feeling, but a Savior whose presence will examine, judge, and rearrange all that we thought was immovable and comfortable and unquestioned, all our assumptions about what matters and how the world is ordered and how we relate to each other will be undone and put back together by the work of Christ's Spirit with us. It would have been better if we had an actual baptism today, but one of my convictions about baptism and the church is that our sacrament of baptism actually believes that water is thicker than blood. That when we baptize a child into the life of the Christian community we are dismantling our understanding of what a nuclear family is and then putting it back together. A baptism is a radical act that says to a child that your parents may love you very much, but they alone cannot make you a Christian. Baptism challenges us to live with the understanding that in the waters of baptism our nuclear family is now the church and only secondarily our blood family. To the extent we are able as a community to live like water is thicker than blood, to the extent we are able to act toward each other like water is thicker than blood, to the extent that our life together reflects to the world a community where water is thicker than blood, will be the extent that we are actually functioning as the church of Jesus Christ as opposed to a religious social club of the Presbyterian persuasion.

Maybe that is what is meant by '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, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law,' they will be divided, undone, and then mended and put back together again. In his book, *Resurrection Shaped Life*, Episcopal Bishop Jake Owensby points out that author Anne LaMott once compared grace to the Japanese art form Kintsugi. According to Owensby, 'Kintsugi is the art of repairing broken pottery. Artisans mend chips and cracks of bowls and saucers, pitchers and jars using lacquer mixed with gold dust. Initially you might

assume that the artists are trying to disguise the damage to a piece of pottery by covering it with gold leaf,' Owensby assumes, but the artists actually want the eye to be drawn to the places where the object has been cracked because 'they intend to highlight the broken places,' letting 'beauty emerge from the distinctive broken places' as the fragments are held together by the whole.¹ Could that be what Jesus is up to here? Taking our allegiance to flawlessness and perfection and a certain order to things and undoing it all right before our eyes before putting all the fragments together better and more beautiful than before even as our blemishes shimmer in the light of his grace.

Many years ago free-lance writer Mark Buchanan wrote a book about discipleship called 'Your God is too Safe.' Meaning that while the god of Jesus Christ is reliable and loving and full of grace, this same God can be unpredictable and ask us to stretch ourselves or do something we would prefer not to do or take on something makes us uncomfortable. In theologian George Hunsinger's words, 'the grace of God really comes to lost sinners, but in coming it disrupts [us] to the core. It slays to make alive and sets the captive free. Grace may of course work silently and secretly like a germinating seed as well as like a bolt from the blue.' It is equally incalculable as it is 'reliable, unmerited, and full of blessing. It is as unsettling as it is comforting.'² And not just grace, but the figure of Jesus Christ. He undoes us and all our comfortable predictabilities in order to mend us and put us back together again, more just, more beautiful, more fully alive, than ever before. Amen.

¹ Jake Owensby, *A Resurrection-Shaped Life*, XIV.

² George Hunsinger, *Disruptive Grace*, 16-17.