

Jesus asks his followers: “Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth?” Well, yea, we *did* in fact, think that. But all this talk of fire and division—especially division of family: three against two, father against son, daughter-in-law against mother-in-law. No one could blame us if we were thinking to ourselves: “Dear Lord, where is the good news in *that*?”

We could sure use a hopeful word these days instead of a gospel text that seems to inspire further separation. Fortunately, these hard words from Jesus take on a more encouraging tone when they are put in context. There are, after all, different kinds of divisions—some are visible on the surfaces of life and some are cloaked in the human heart.

Let me tell you a story.

Last Tuesday was the feast day of a Carmelite sister, St. Teresa Benedicta of the Cross. She was born Edith Stein into a devoutly Jewish family in Breslau, Germany. Edith was the youngest of eleven and the beloved child of her mother, Auguste, who was widowed when Edith was two. The two loved one another deeply, although by her teen years, Edith had become an atheist.

She was so moved by the tragedies of World War I that, in 1915, Edith became a nursing assistant and a year later she completed a doctoral thesis titled “On the Problem of Empathy” under the brilliant philosopher, Edmund Husserl. During the course of her doctoral work, Edith read voraciously in philosophy, psychology and religion. In time, she came across the writings of two great Carmelite saints: Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross.

Edith felt as if her whole life and study had prepared her to embrace the life and practice of Christian mysticism. The combination of liturgy, praying the divine office and silence transfigured her. In 1922, Edith Stein was baptized. Her mother wept. Here were two women—mother and daughter—both lovers of God, one a faithful and deeply devout Jew, and the other a Christian drawn to the most secluded expression of contemplative religious life.

For a time, Edith’s mother learned to be content and even moved by her daughter’s devotion, while Edith pursued a career as an educator. But in 1933, when Hitler’s Nuremberg government had made it illegal for her to teach, Edith decided to finally join the Carmelite nuns in Cologne. When she announced her plans, peace at home was a thing of the past. Edith’s family was devastated and she clung to her friends to keep from faltering in her

decision. Her mother, not daring to display her anger openly, wept in desperation and her brothers and sisters did all they could to change Edith's mind. To her 84-year-old mother, it seemed as if Edith was deserting her family just as the Nazis were beginning to persecute German Jews.

Edith and her family were separated—a difficult division of one kind. But for Edith, now Carmelite sister Teresa Benedicta of the Cross, the darker, more insidious division was yet to come.

By 1938, the situation in Germany had grown steadily worse. In the Jews, Hitler had found people to blame for Germany's post-war woes. On November 9th and 10th, in a horrific crime known as "Kristallnacht", Nazis torched synagogues, vandalized Jewish homes, schools and businesses and killed close to 100 Jews. In the aftermath, some of Edith's remaining family emigrated, but most died in a concentration camp. And now Edith had to be separated from her Carmelite sisters, who smuggled her under the cover of darkness across the border into Holland. There, her sister Rosa, who had also become a Christian, joined her at the convent in Echt.

At that's where, four years later, the darker, more insidious division came for them both. Some years earlier, Dutch Roman Catholic bishops had publicly denounced the Nazi's deportations and murder of Jews. In retaliation for the bishops' letter, the Gestapo arrested Edith and her sister, Rosa, and eventually sent them to Auschwitz where they died for being Jews.

Now, I promised you good news, so let's start walking back toward the light. And here's where that trail begins: the divisions that Jesus is talking about are not the *intent* of his life and ministry, but the *effect*. Divisions are not a *pre-condition* of the peace that he ushers in, but a *consequence*.

The division that Jesus is talking about results from the purifying fire that he brought to the earth—the fire that will be kindled in the crucifixion. For some, the truth that they experience in that purifying fire will lead them to separations on the surfaces of life; even separations from loved ones. But then uniformity is not part of the Gospel message.

Once ignited in the death and resurrection of Christ, that purifying fire began to spread. In the early days of the church, the spreading Gospel separated not just families, but entire communities. Following Jesus was not *and is still* not always easy, because the truth of the God's peace changes everything.

You see, the peace of the Roman Empire was the result of rule based on fear, blame and death. For instance, some years before Luke's Gospel was written, an enormous fire nearly destroyed the city of Rome. To divert

attention away from himself, Emperor Nero found a target to blame. He arrested, tortured and executed Roman Christians.

This is called “scapegoating” and it works by distracting people from their own part in systemic problems. We become complacent imagining that we have solved the cause of our problems when we blame them on or simply remove targeted people. One person or group pays the price for regaining a momentary peace and then the cycle begins again. This is how Hitler used the deaths of Edith and Rosa Stein, and six million other Jews.

But make no mistake: the human willingness to unite a conflicted community by scapegoating vulnerable victims is still deep within the most frightened corners of the human heart, including my own heart and yours. Fortunately, the purifying fire of God’s peace works its way into our darkest recesses.

Through his crucifixion, Jesus created an alternative to the momentary peace enforced by inflicting violence onto scapegoats. Despite surface appearances, God disrupted the power of peace based on fear and death *once and for all*. Our absolutely loving God does not want even one person to be lost. By dying on the cross, Jesus exposed the truth of collective violence for what it is.

After the crucifixion, God’s purifying fire continues to undermine our human dependency on peace maintained by fear, blame and violence. God’s peace is characterized not by the power of dominating blame that controls, but by the power of loving forgiveness that restores. God’s peace is characterized not by fear and greed, but by love and humility. Within each of us is the capacity to seek self-centered, controlling peace for the purpose of acquiring safety or wealth or status at the expense of others. That part of us resists the arising of God’s kingdom, because it threatens and will ultimately end what we have become addicted to.

But we also each have the capacity to kindle the fire of God’s loving peace within us and a responsibility to tend that fire for each other. Still, it is the peace of Christ, not the peace of humans. And so we have to watch our human tendency to want to dominate, control and blame. Fr. Abbot Andrew Marr, of St. Gregory’s Abbey, the Episcopal Benedictine monastery in Michigan, warns those of us trying to live into God’s peace. “We need to realize,” he wrote, “that the Word, the forgiving victim, is a divisive two-edged sword. That is, the pure forgiveness of the divine victim shows up the least bit of resentment we allow ourselves to harbor in the farthest, darkest, corners of our souls.”

Jesus died on the cross to break the human addiction to fear, blame and death. By his death and resurrection, Jesus created an opening to an alternative way to relate to each other with love, humility and forgiveness. In seeking to interpret the signs of the present times, it is not enough simply to find fault in others.

Look for Christ in them.

Resistance will strengthen for a time as the kingdom becomes increasingly apparent. Be courageous in the face of resistance, not to prove yourself right, but with humility.

Look for Christ in each other.

Opposition to God's peace will continue to stir up division, even hatred and violence. Forgiveness may be hard to come by and guarding against resentment may not be sufficient.

Look for the Risen Christ in your own heart.

Prayer is, after all, the first, best response to the powers of Empire. Edith Stein suffered separation and death by such power, and yet she remained lovingly faithful both to the crucified Jesus and to her Jewish family.

Listen to her prayer and take it in: "Who are you, kindly light, who fill me now and brighten all the darkness of my heart? You guide me forward like a mother's hand and, if you let me go, I could not take a single step alone. You are the space, embracing all my being, hidden in it and what name can contain you? You, Holy Spirit, you, eternal love!"

Works consulted:

Herbstrith, Waltraud, O. Carm., and Bernard Bonowitz, O.C.S.O.. *Edith Stein, a Biography*. San Francisco: Ignatius, 1992

Marr, A., O.S.B. (2013, August 16). Human Swords, God's Peace. Retrieved from <https://andrewmarrosb.wordpress.com/2013/08/16/human-swords-gods-peace/>