

More often than not Jesus is the consummate man of peace,
but sometimes, like today, he puts on a hard hat,
picks up a sledge hammer
- and comes out swinging!

Believe me:
it's much easier to preach the Prince of Peace
than to homilize the hard hat Jesus.

So, what's all this talk about division?

We need to remember that, in Jesus' time,
attachment to one's immediate and extended family
was a matter of life and death:
your existence (shelter, food, support)
depended on your family connections
and without them you had no standing in society.

(That's why, in the scriptures,
the plight of widows and orphans gets so much attention.)

To be separated from family
was to jeopardize all of your relationships and your life itself.
But that's just what Jesus invited his listeners to do.
When he beckoned, "Come follow me!"
he was asking people to leave their own family and to join his.
And he warned them that if they did this,
they would inevitably suffer separation from those who did not.

I think we'd like to believe that we're beyond all that,
and the need for such dire warnings.

Maybe... maybe not...

Perhaps, after 2,000 years, all we've really achieved
is a mutually agreed upon mutual *silence* about faith:
a kind of "don't ask, don't tell" regarding religion
that keeps social bonds from being disturbed
by differences in belief and practice.

On the other hand, there are at least some religions
that are regularly subject to criticism and to some degree, ostracism.

Take Christianity.

There are some who are comfortable being identified as Christian -
as long as that identification also dissociates them
from particular forms or branches of Christianity.

"I'm a Christian - but -

not like the ones you see on TV

or,

not like the right-wingers,

or,

not like the politicians who are Christian-in-name-only,

or,

not like..."

well, the list can go on and on.

And then there's,

"Well, I'm a Catholic - but -

let me tell you all the things about Catholicism I disagree with..."

I hear this all the time:

Catholics who define their faith

in terms of their disagreements with it.

Many of you have been asked by family members and friends,

"Why are you still Catholic?"

Why do you still go to church?

How can you still believe in all that stuff?"

And, sometimes, as much as you wanted to answer,

you found it difficult to respond.

Such questions seldom divide families or friends

but they can draw an uncomfortable line of separation

between the inquirers, who go away shaking their heads,

and the Catholics, who may not know what to say.

Perhaps some of us suffer from a religious inferiority complex.

We have been embarrassed by blatant hypocrisy,

the scandal of sexual abuse,

and incompetent leadership

and often confused by Church teachings that run absolutely counter

to what our culture holds up as good.

Judging from the media

you would think that the whole mission of the Catholic Church

was centered on sexual and biological morality -

and that, of course, is not true.

As important, as difficult and as controversial as such issues are,

what the Catholic Church is truly centered on

(as is the whole of Christianity)

is the person of Jesus Christ, the life he offers us

and the fire of faith he invites us to share.

People ask me questions, too:

"Why do you remain a Catholic priest?

Do you believe in all that stuff."

My answer is that I'm a Christian precisely because I believe in "all that stuff" in the gospel of Jesus.

And I'm a Catholic because I believe that this Church has, for 2,000 years, struggled to preach and live Christ's gospel.

And I freely acknowledge that this struggle has known sad, sinful and tragically regrettable times as well as times of wisdom, truth and grace.

But most of all, I am a Catholic Christian because of what we are doing here, this morning, in word and sacrament.

I am blessed to be part of a community of believers which traces its beginnings to a supper, one night in an upper room, in Jerusalem where Jesus, a faithful Jew, took bread and wine for Passover, and broke, blessed and shared it with his friends and asked them and now us to do the same in memory of him.

That's the heart of it all for me and at the heart of that meal is the loving sacrifice of the heart of Jesus.

May the faith which has gathered us together at this table open itself widely and warmly to welcome many more to join us.

May that faith be like a fire in our hearts: a flame ignited by Christ and fueled by his Spirit.

And in the words of the Letter to the Hebrews, may we "persevere in running the race that lies before us while keeping our eyes fixed on Jesus, the leader and perfecter of faith."

- Rev. Austin Fleming