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## Introduction

Corrymeela's mission is to "Transform Division through Human Encounter." It's a call to action we're reminded of each week in staff and volunteer meetings, a mission we share with groups visiting the centre, and a string of words we say to each other here in both sincerity and banter. The work we strive toward engages the division that exists internally, interpersonally, between and within families and communities, among nations, among all forms of clusters of people. Our world is rife with division. We don't need any more of it.

The text for this week, however, speaks of division; not one that is transformed, but one that is brought. Jesus' words are clear, blunt, and, for many and for me, disturbing. He has not come to bring peace, but rather division. This division comes within a litany of other actions – work Jesus is here to do – and also anxiety: the stress that bears down until the work is completed and a wish that the work were already done. Jesus' anxiety rises with the prospect of the work to be done; mine rises with the work itself (can't we find another way?). I invite you to enter with me into this anxiety; to sit enmeshed in confusion; to allow these words that bring division to stir our complacency; to hear "You hypocrites" and to hear it personally; to find solace; and perhaps, to find transformation.

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## Text

Luke 12:49–56

"I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what stress I am under until it is completed! Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division! 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 her daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law." He also said to the crowds, "When you see a cloud rising in the west, you immediately say, 'It is going to rain'; and so it happens. And when you see the south wind blowing, you say, 'There will be scorching heat'; and it happens. You hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present time?"

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## Comment

Corrymeela is a peace and reconciliation centre where I am living and working for the summer. The people I encounter here bring their stories of division, sometimes arriving with the people with whom they experience division, hoping for its opposite: peace. When you live at a peace and reconciliation centre, you're expected to know what that word means.

This expectation is quickly dismantled when the question is posed to the questioner. Colin Craig's Dialogue for Peaceful Change training asks participants to define, in as many ways as they can, conflict and then to define peace. Through this exercise, we're guided to see the misguided ways we've approached these words; we're guided to hold them not so much in opposition, but instead to see how conflict flows out of peace and peace out of conflict, that they can flow into each other and co exist. Peace is seen through its traditional motifs of love and harmony, and takes on its lesser noted sides of boredom and stagnation. Similarly, conflict holds themes of division and disagreement, while also leading us into a means for growth and change.

This week's text follows Jesus along his journey en route to Jerusalem. As the crowds gather to listen, his message is one of discipleship spoken with urgency. Jesus has come to bring fire and there is a baptism he must undergo. Like conflict and peace, fire and baptism can be understood by their traditional connotations; fire associated with death and destruction, baptism with renewal and regeneration. However, if we continue to uncover the meaning of these words, we might be reminded of a natural forest fire, one that burns away the dead wood and restores nutrients into the soil allowing a new forest to be birthed anew. Baptism may be thought of as a process of immersing, cleansing, removing what once was and inviting the spirit to enter within. Like the interplay between peace and conflict, we might notice fire and baptism in more fluid terms.

Let's bring this approach to Jesus' next words. While I am quick to recall the many times peace is offered, encouraged, and delighted in throughout the gospels – "go in peace" (Luke 7:50), "peace to this house" (Luke 10:5), "peace be with you" (John 20:19–26), "blessed are the peacemakers" (Matthew 5:9) – this text, specifically Luke 12:51, "Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division!" is startling, confusing, even distressing. The text is quite plain with its language of division. The family will be divided in a myriad of ways: by count (two against three, three against two), across generations (son/daughter against father/mother), and extending out past the nuclear unit (mother-in-law against daughter-in-law). This set of verses is unrelenting in its promise of division, one after another after another. And this understanding of division is strictly presented in opposition to peace.

What, then, does it mean to divide? And in this division, what pits us against each other? What purpose does this division serve? How too might we hold the tension, confusion, paradox of both the peace and division that Jesus promises?

Whatever the answers may be – and these answers are important, that we explore them in our own context – the division is painful. Especially within a family. In conflict, particularly conflict that is divisive, there may follow misunderstanding, fear, estrangement, and resentment. There is great loss when division, by necessity or choice, occurs.

Earlier in Luke's gospel, we learn about people who want to be followers of Jesus: one asks to first bury his father and the other asks to first say farewell to those at home (Luke 9:59–62). Each of these requests, to tend to the family first before the task of discipleship, is met with rebuke. Later in Luke, we hear Jesus further define the cost of discipleship: "Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple" (Luke 14:26).

Discipleship is immediate and urgent. Discipleship does not wait. Discipleship requires division, requires that we leave behind what was.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, reflecting on Luke 9, explains that discipleship understood on our terms makes it out to be something “humanly reasonable and comprehensible [...] It becomes a human program, which I can organize according to my own judgment and can justify rationally and ethically.” But true discipleship “separates the followers from their previous experience. A call to discipleship thus immediately creates a new situation. Staying in the old situation and following Christ mutually exclude each other.”

This sort of change is demanding. It is fundamentally upending. It stirs our complacency with our lives lived as they are.

For we who resist the call, resist discipleship, Jesus says “You hypocrites!” He likens the signs of the times, the work of his ministry to a cloud rising in the west and a south wind blowing – obvious signals for rain and scorching heat, respectively. To the crowds who have watched, listened, and learned, who have been challenged with a message of earthly poverty as a path to abundance in heaven (Luke 12:33), who in these verses are told there will be division, Jesus is again plain in his language. It is hypocrisy to experience, bear witness to, be immersed in the presence of Jesus and claim any misunderstanding or confusion of what is to come and what needs to be done.

Between the promise of the division and the condemnation of hypocrisy, there may be pain and anger, fear and anxiety. May we find the space within to experience our emotional reaction and sit with our troubled thoughts. May we find solace in the humanity and divinity of Jesus and in the transformational power of the gospels.

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## Response

May Jalaluddin Rumi’s poem *The Guest House*, translated by Coleman Barks, offer grace and space for the pain and anger, fear and anxiety that may surround the call to discipleship.

“This being human is a guest house.  
Every morning a new arrival.

A joy, a depression, a meanness,  
some momentary awareness comes  
as an unexpected visitor.

Welcome and entertain them all!  
Even if they’re a crowd of sorrows,  
who violently sweep your house  
empty of its furniture,  
still, treat each guest honorably.  
He may be clearing you out

for some new delight.

The dark thought, the shame, the malice,  
meet them at the door laughing,  
and invite them in.

Be grateful for whoever comes,  
because each has been sent  
as a guide from beyond.”

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## Prayer

### A Prayer for Reconciliation by Pádraig Ó Tuama

Where there is separation,  
there is pain.  
And where there is pain,  
there is a story.

And where there is a story,  
there is understanding,  
and misunderstanding,  
listening  
and not listening.

May we – separated people, estranged strangers,  
unfriended families, divided communities –  
turn toward each other,  
and turn toward our stories,  
with understanding  
and listening,  
with argument and acceptance,  
with challenge, change  
and consolation.

Because if God is to be found,  
God will be found  
in the space  
between.

Amen.

