

SERMON: Commitment and Conflict
TEXT: Luke 12:49-56

8-14-22

Rachel Held Evans is my new favorite Christian author, but I am sad that I am only now discovering her books after her untimely death in 2019 at the age of 37. In her obituary, the New York Times dubbed her *The Voice of the Wandering Evangelical*.

She grew up deeply immersed in the evangelical church, and it was her goal to be a model Christian. "My family and I attended church at least twice a week," she wrote. "My sister and I went to a private Christian school. Dad worked in Christian education, and Mom quit teaching to stay home with us. We listened to contemporary Christian music and read stacks of Christian books. While we associated with non-Christians from the community, those interactions always carried with them the relentless pressure of winning people to the Lord. Every summer I set about evangelizing my East Birmingham neighborhood - the Mormons

next door, the Catholics across the street, the gay couple down the road.”

Yet, she admitted, “Early on I sensed a profound disconnect between what I was supposed to believe and what I actually believed.... In Sunday school, my precocious inquiries met with furrowed brows, cleared throats, and the not-too-subtle suggestion that good Christians don’t ask such impertinent things.... At my Pentecostal elementary school, I learned that demons hid around every corner, Bill Clinton was the antichrist..., and the rest of the world lived in ‘darkness.’”

“In 2014, Rachel left the evangelical church because, she said, she was done trying to end the church’s culture wars and wanted to focus instead on building a new community among the church’s “refugees”: women who wanted to become ministers, gay Christians and ‘those who refuse to choose between their intellectual integrity and their faith.’” (Elizabeth Dias and Sam Roberts,

Rachel Held Evans, Voice of the Wandering Evangelical, Dies at 37, www.nytimes.com, May 4, 2019)

In what I have read of her best-selling books so far, it appears that she has not suffered estrangement from her parents or her sister. But it is certain that she lost a church family and likely encountered deep conflict and growing division with a number of friends and perhaps extended family over her very public rejection of the faith in which she was raised.

“Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth?” Jesus questioned. “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.”

This is one of those passages in the Bible that disturbs and confuses us. This is one of those passages that countless

preachers have avoided, including this preacher. But after nearly 28 years, I decided it was time to tackle it.

It sounds and feels harsh and very much in conflict with what we typically read and think and feel about Jesus. Hailed as the Prince of Peace at his birth, the angels sang, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors." Jesus himself proclaimed, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God." (Matthew 5:9)

In a book titled, *The Hard Sayings of Jesus*, F.F. Bruce wrote, "One thing is certain: Jesus did not advocate conflict. He taught his followers to offer no resistance or retaliation when they were attacked or ill-treated.... The message which his followers proclaimed in his name after his departure was called the 'gospel of peace' (Eph. 6:15) or the 'word of reconciliation' (2 Cor. 5:19). It was called this not merely as a matter of doctrine but as a fact of experience. Individuals and groups formerly estranged from one another found themselves reconciled through their common

devotion to Christ.” Bruce also pointed out, though, that Jesus spoke from personal experience about tension and conflict within a family, and that members of his own family had no sympathy with his ministry.

Furthermore, a commentary I read pointed to a verse in the Gospel of John (12:31) saying, “‘Jesus is the crisis of the world.’ Crisis does not mean emergency but that moment or occasion of truth and decision about life.... To be placed in the situation of decision is critical, for to turn toward one person or goal or value means turning away from another. According to these sayings, God is so acting toward the world in Jesus of Nazareth that a crisis is created, that is to say, Jesus is ‘making a difference,’ even within families. Peace in the sense of status quo is now disrupted.”

Certainly there are plenty of wars throughout world history where passionate, committed Christians have battled one another over “the right way” to believe. I remember my Presbyterian

mother talking about the uproar it caused in both families when my Catholic father asked her to marry him.

One ironic and unfortunate result of committing one's life to the Prince of Peace is division. COMMITMENT brings CONFLICT.

In 2003, another young woman named Rachel was killed by an Israeli-owned bulldozer while she stood in its way, protesting a demolition campaign that destroyed over a thousand homes in the Gaza Strip. Rachel Corrie was committed - unto death - to peace and justice. She was 23 years old. (www.history.com, This Day in History, March 16, 23-year-old peace activist Rachel Corrie is crushed to death by Israeli bulldozer)

Her parents, after her death, formed the *Rachel Corrie Foundation for Peace & Justice* - a beautiful memorial to her. But I have often wondered whether Rachel's fierce commitment to even travel to such a hotbed of violence caused any conflict with her parents. Had I been Rachel's mother, I imagine we would have had some very heated conversations, marked by her repeated

insistence and devotion to peace, but countered by my own fierce devotion to keeping her from danger.

As another commentary stated so succinctly, “The call for decision is a call for division.”

But I want to lift up an important caveat. It is imperative for us to take caution in applying this passage to the deep divisions in our country and in our world today. While many feel more strongly than ever before the urgency to speak up and stand up for what we believe, it must never be done with violence. Never.

And let us take stock of our values and hold them up against the teachings of Jesus, for a commitment to follow him is a commitment to learn from him. To imitate him. To walk in his footsteps. To live by his imperative that all God’s laws are based on love. To love the Lord our God with ALL our heart, with ALL our soul, with ALL our mind, and with ALL our strength, and to love our neighbor as ourselves.

Yes, even a commitment to love will cause divisions. Because we often appoint ourselves as the judge and jury, determining who is worthy of our love and who is not. I remember a photo I saw years ago in a magazine, showing a man holding up a sign that read, "Freedom is the right to hate." I think the story was about homosexuality.

Jesus would ask us to love that man, as well, just as he taught in his Sermon on the Mount: "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you."

In her book, *Wholehearted Faith*, published after her death, Rachel Held Evans wrote about the hate mail she gets. She recalled the words of the prophet Isaiah, who said that the coming of God's justice will be a time in which people "shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks." A friend had given her an origami kit, so as a Lenten discipline, she printed out some emails and began to fold. She described the process she used. "I followed the pattern in the

book, folding these flat sheets of accusation into three-dimensional representations of something altogether different. Gradually, a wing emerged, and then another. Then a neck. Then a crooked little beak. Gradually, healing tears began to fall, and I let my fingers pray.... What I learned turning my hate mail into origami is that we are meant to remake this world together. We hurt together, and we are called to heal together.... In a sense, even the people who continue to hate me and call me names - Jezebel, heretic, demon-possessed, satanic - were integral parts of this beautiful experience."

Included in his parting words to his disciples, Jesus said, "Peace I leave with you. My peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid." In all our divisions and conflicts, may our commitment to Jesus be a commitment to his peace. To the glory of God.

AMEN.