

Inside The American Adventure pavilion at EPCOT an animatronic movie plays multiple times a day that depicts in tear-jerking quality the history of us as a country. Now...I will admit I can't think of the last time I saw the whole thing because when you have a half hour in the air-conditioned dark, sitting in a semi-comfortable chair during a week at Disney, sleep comes really quickly. However, I somehow always manage to stay awake up through the Civil War portion of the story, and I think in some ways that part is so emotionally exhausting that I end up crashing out fairly quickly after and wake up in time to see Ben Franklin and Mark Twain, the narrators of the tale, parting ways.

The Civil War portion plays out as you would expect initially. There are descriptions of what leads up to the war, the divisions that existed, the battles that were fought, but then it crescendos into a sweeping dramatic song that tells the tale of two brothers—one wore gray, the other wore blue. There are family photos from when they are toddlers through them growing up, and eventually as they grow taller and their beards grow longer, you start to see the division seeping between them. There is a photo of each of them in their respective uniforms, and then gradually one of the brothers fades from the photo, and eventually the other fades too. The implication is that eventually the war robbed this family of both of their sons, who never had the opportunity to reconcile their differences, their lives cut short by the onslaught of war.

Obviously, it's a dramatization meant to evoke as much of an emotional response as possible, but while it is just a story, it's a story that is far too representative of things that have happened between family members from the beginning of time. Clearly, fighting on opposite sides of a war is about as dramatic as you can get in the realm of family squabbles, but it was a reality that was readily apparent throughout this country during the Civil War. Yet, it happens in nearly every facet of our lives. Think about those who found themselves on opposite sides of the debate about civil rights. Think about those who end up on different ends of the spectrum when it comes to religion. We all know of those families that have to have strict rules about not talking about God around the dinner table because while one person adamantly believes in a higher power, another is a strident atheist. Probably most recently, and at the forefront of most of our minds, are those divisions that occur around politics, particularly in our country—the lines that are drawn between Republican and Democrat, those family members who have defriended each other on Facebook or have refused to speak to one another over the course of the last six years because things have gotten so

out of hand. Yet, sometimes it doesn't even need to be that dramatic. Imagine the family dynamics where one member is a Yankees fan and the other a Red Sox fan, a Duke fan wed into a UNC family. Our world, our families are rife with divisions, and well...according to Jesus, he might just have something to do with that fact.

Jesus sounds today in our gospel like how we sound when we're under a deadline at work and are on the brink of not being able to handle it for much longer. He even says it himself. He is stressed!! He is stressed beyond belief that he has this massive task before him, of kindling a fire for the kingdom of God in people's hearts and getting them to pay attention to the signs around them, to repent and turn back to God and their neighbor, but he knows the time is running short. He just wants people to listen. He just wants the work to be near completion. He just wants to feel like something is happening! Like he's making some semblance of progress, and that stress boils over into words that maybe sound a little harsh for Jesus, but even in their harshness bring a cold dose of reality for those gathered around him and for us once again hearing the gospel anew.

We spend so much time proclaiming that Jesus is the Prince of Peace, that he comes to bring a peace which passes all understanding, that when he starts talking about fire and division we want to throw our hands up and say whoa whoa, Jesus, what happened to the happy-go-lucky gospel? But the thing is, the happy-go-lucky gospel has more to do with what we have created in our minds in some sort of watered down version of Jesus' words than what Jesus actually said, and this gospel is a stark reminder of that. Now, I'm not saying that Jesus has nothing to do with peace, it's more that we tend to skip to the end of the story, where peace lies once we've lived out the gospel and shared the kingdom of God with the world, that we miss all the steps that it takes to *get* to that peace.

Even still, we might be wondering where in the world all this family member against family member talk comes from. Can't Jesus just say well, pursuing the work of the kingdom is going to be hard work and leave it at that? I mean, maybe, but again remember, he's stressed *and* Jesus is never one to shy away from speaking the truth to his followers so that they know just what exactly they're getting themselves into when they decide to place their footsteps behind his. And when we take a step back from the harshness and actually think about what Jesus is saying, we realize there is deep truth to what he is saying.

Think about the world that Jesus' followers are living in. They're an occupied people who are amid an Empire that has declared that their Emperor isn't just their leader but is *God*. To deny that the Emperor was

God was heresy, was treason, and so imagine the risk that would present to families? What do you do when your son or daughter comes home and declares that they have seen the Messiah and his name isn't Caesar, but Jesus? What do you do when your husband or wife comes home to your traditionally Jewish household and declares that even Samaritans are your neighbors in the kingdom of God? What do you do when suddenly half of your household's priorities have shifted in favor of seeking the kingdom of God and caring for their neighbor in ways that haven't been truly seen in generations? Is it any wonder that Jesus is warning his followers that sticking by him may potentially drive wedges between them and their family members? He needs them to know that signing on to a life of discipleship in the kingdom of God is risky business and they need to consider their course of action carefully.

As much as we'd all like to chalk this gospel up to Jesus being stressed, I think we all know that we can't, because to ignore it is to deny the reality that we already spend far too much time ignoring. I think, in part because our world is already filled with so many divisions and arguments, we don't like having religion, faith, Jesus being just another thing that causes rifts between people. Because of that we have an immense capacity for watering down what we believe, where we stand, and how we operate in the world for the sake of not ruffling too many feathers or troubling the waters more than they already are. We err on the side of trying to make everyone happy and so we ignore where the gospel is calling us because isn't it just easier for everyone to get along?

Yet...what is the cost of keeping everything copacetic and everyone happy? The cost, more often than not, is the gospel and the lives of our neighbors. When confronted with either the scripture that says there is neither Jew nor Greek, male or female, and a world that is determined to divide us based on race, gender, creed, and any number of things, we have a tendency to defer to the world. We watch women's rights being stripped away one law at a time, and we shrug and say, well, certainly it won't get that bad, and well, I mean, women have all those emotions to contend with so we probably need to curb some things. We watch as our black and brown siblings are killed, pushed to the margins, and treated as second-class citizens, and we ask why everything has to be about race, and shouldn't all lives matter, and everyone is just far too sensitive about these things. We don't want to risk division by standing up for our siblings who have been robbed of their voices.

When confronted with scripture that says to sell our possessions and be on our guard against all kinds of greed, and a world that is bound and

determined to tell us that we need more, more, more to be worthy of anything, we tend to side on the side of our money. We say but we have *earned* our stuff, our money, this is only what we had coming to you and if others have less than us, well then clearly they didn't work hard enough, and we would rather have more than them anyway.

When confronted with scripture that says the greatest commandment is to love our neighbor as ourselves, and a world that says, here is your laundry list of people you should hate, people you should condemn to hell, we rarely have any problem with siding with the world. Sure, we give our couched responses, we don't *hate* them, we just don't agree with them. We don't *hate* them, we just don't approve of their choices. We don't *hate* them, but clearly the Bible says...while ignoring the whole time that the Bible also a lot more things about love than hate, and honestly very few things about the people we tend to condemn.

So, yes, our faith, when lived our authentically, Jesus, when followed steadfastly, does run the risk of dividing us from those who are uninterested in living our a life centered on love, grace, and hope. It does run the risk of saying, yes this is where we stand and if you're on the other side, well, we have to figure out where to go from there. Yet...the kingdom has to be worth staking something on. Love has to be worth staking something on. We have to be willing to stake our faith on something. **AMEN!!!**