When I came home after my junior year in college I told my parents I was a “Christian Existentialist.” I think I had just read Fear and Trembling by Soren Kierkegaard and was struck by his insistence on the individual making his or her own way under God. I heard one professor summarize “existentialism” by saying – “You draw your own bath-water and then you get in.” I may still be a Christian Existentialist in that I am convinced that we have to choose the truth that will shape our living. Absolute Truth and perfect vision of all that is holy are illusory; so, with fear and trembling we must choose a narrative in which to live. I choose the Christian narrative and I choose it without needing to say to others that I have a lock on God, righteousness, life. Other stories and other takes on the truth have life-giving power and followers of other traditions and philosophies have to do the same thing that I and we have to do – draw our own bath and get in. My bath is baptism! I will testify to the life-giving power in the font!

Well, what I did not know then and do not know now about existentialism could fill a bathtub. My parents heard my pronouncement, I suspect, with mild amusement and maybe a little fear and trembling. Yet, both my parents and I knew, instinctively, that what I was declaring was that I needed to figure my own way into the Christian faith. I could not simply
echo their faith, the faith of my Sunday School teachers, the faith of my preachers – though all of these people had influenced me a great deal. They knew and I knew, I had to create some division between them and me in order to find my way. Their great love for me allowed the division and our bonds were never broken; in fact, the bonds of love and family were strengthened by our acknowledged and embraced differences!

(I must admit, however, that every now and then I see my deceased father – first pew, left side from the chancel – shaking his head at something I say from this pulpit. Every now and then I can see him putting his face in his hands and whispering “No, son, no...you are wrong.” I still hear his voice and the division between his thinking and my thinking remains, especially since he has been deceased now for 18 years. But his love for me and my love for him was and remains far more powerful than any disagreement we might have had, and that is what I hear most often. Our divisions were unto life for him and me both.)

The point is – division is part of life. All of us have to find our own way. I see it clearly with Bess and Will, our nearly 11 and 12 ½ year old children. Each one is trying to discover where she/he begins and where mom and dad leave off. Our children are testing their own tastes in books, in speech, in television, in sports activities against what mom and dad like. Division is a natural process that leads, we hope, into human beings having a strong sense of self, a strong sense of place in the world, a strong sense of worth, and a life-giving story that each can call
her/his own.

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The division to which I refer is healthy division because it is held together in love.
I think this healthy division is different than the division to which Jesus points.

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When Jesus said: Do you think I have come to bring peace on earth? No, I tell you, but rather division! and then Jesus goes on to talk about father against son, mother against daughter and on and on... Jesus is talking about the division that comes when love does not bind all things together in perfect harmony.
*Jesus is talking about division that comes when people see him as a threat to the social and religious order.
*Jesus is talking about how people react when someone – either within the family or without – calls into question the norms of existence.
*Jesus is talking about people being so trapped in the ways of fear that the only reaction they can have to something that is outside of the accepted orthodoxy is to lash out with violence.
*Jesus is talking about the division that comes when someone or some group embody a new reality that calls into question the old reality, a new reality that overturns the status quo.

We can take our minds to the abolition of slavery, women’s suffrage, civil rights struggles, the push for equal place in church and society for gays and lesbians, the pressing need for
environmental protection, a just immigration policy. The change of accepted norms, the shift of paradigms are difficult and have always led to violent reaction from those who are well-served by the old order or just accustomed to prevailing norms.

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Imagine that my name is Stan Deaton and you are listening to Georgia Public Radio (I know this is a stretch for some of you!). This version of “Today in Georgia History” aired on Tuesday.

The women of Georgia finally got the right to vote on this day in 1921 when Governor Thomas Hardwick signed the act that made it official. The suffrage movement had been slow to gain ground in the South. Many women joined men in arguing that there was no more important job than wife and mother, and that the dirty work of the political arena should be left to men alone. Others countered that there could be no real reform of child labor, education, or health care until women could participate in the process.

On the national level, when the women suffrage amendment was submitted to the states for ratification, Georgia was the first state to reject it. But when Tennessee became the 36th state to ratify it in August 1920, it became the Nineteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. Still, Georgia kept registration barriers in place that prevented women from voting in the 1920 presidential election. Women didn't vote in Georgia until 1922. With the governor's signature, the long battle for equal suffrage finally ended in victory for Georgia women on August 13, 1921, Today in Georgia History.

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Change in the direction of justice and inclusion is always difficult. Growing beyond prevailing practices that keep certain groups locked in second class status is hard work that takes vision and patience and skill. Something as clear to us now as the Constitutional Right to Vote for Women took years and years to come into being and practice.

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Jesus, as Luke tells us the story of Jesus, was on the way to the cross because his embodiment of love was lighting a match to all the structures of the religious and political life in the world. Jesus embodied a God of vulnerable love; not a God of violence. Jesus embodied a God of forgiveness; not a God of wrath. Jesus embodied a God who celebrates human diversity; not a God of the clan. And Jesus’ embodiment of this God of vulnerable love, forgiveness, and generosity to the whole world cost him a baptism of death. Jesus was the disrupting other to the prevailing ways of understanding God and neighbor, and Jesus’ preaching, teaching, practices led the leaders of church and society to try to find a way to extinguish his divisive voice.

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If we always think of the other as threatening and defiling to the us then death will surely follow. If we cannot see that the other may be the voice of God calling us to a more full and glorious way of living in the world, then we will nail the prophets to trees. If we cannot see that the other may be leading us to a more lasting and wholesome peace, then we will always be on war-footing.

Jesus was able to see that his proclamation of God’s love that
breaks down hateful divisions would, ironically, create more divisions before bringing unity. When Jesus said he came to bring division not peace he was predicting the result of people trying to live beyond the existing divisions in religion and culture. Jesus was bringing division because he was bringing change in the direction of unity.

Jesus knew what would come; he predicted the hostility but ... Jesus hoped for, prayed for, lived for, died for, was raised for a new day of peace where diversity and divisions in the world would be the beautiful reflection of God’s creative spirit and generous love.

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Rabbi Jonathan Sacks is the Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of Great Britain and the Commonwealth, and his most recent book is entitled To Heal a Fractured World: The Ethics of Responsibility. In the first chapter of his book he acknowledges that he is writing out of his own faith tradition, the Jewish tradition, but he has a vision that is broader. He writes in the opening chapter:

This book is about the faith I love and the people I know, but this too I know: that goodness and virtue are widely
distributed throughout humanity. Many times, I have been inspired by the community-building, life-transforming, hope-creating work of Christians, Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists, Jains, Zoroastrians, Bahai; indeed of every faith with whom it has been my privilege to come into contact. Equally, I value the moral force of many forms of secular humanism, from John Stuart Mill to Bertrand Russell and beyond. Experience has taught me the truth of the wise words of Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook (1865-1935):

The narrow-mindedness that leads one to see whatever is outside the bounds of one’s own people ... as ugly and defiled is a terrible darkness that causes general destruction to the entire edifice of spiritual good, the light of which every refined soul hopes for.

...The religious expressions of humankind (the holy), says Rabbi Sacks, are incommensurable, but goodness – bringing blessing to lives other than one’s own – is as near as we get to a universal language. Poverty, hunger, disease are evils in any culture, and those who heal them are giants of the spirit (To Heal a Fractured World, p. 10).

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So, we pray ... Come, Lord Jesus, help us to live into the divisions that make for a lasting peace and for a justice that never fails so that one day we will know the ultimate unity of divine love.

Amen.