

**“Following the Christ Who Brings Fire and Division”**

**Luke 12:49–56**

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The passage we have read from Luke is not easy to read, much less respond to with the customary words, “Praise be to you, O Christ.” Jesus starts out talking about bringing fire to the earth which is difficult enough. I was in an apartment fire as a child, and though it was put out pretty quickly, it was terrifying. My mother was cooking tater tots, and as a result, I didn’t eat tater tots for decades! I have also had to be with a family identifying a loved one killed in a house fire. It was the most difficult thing I have done in forty years of ministry. Forest fires have been devastating in the western part of our nation and more recently in the UK. Simply mentioning the word “fire” can be unsettling.

But Jesus doesn’t stop here. He goes on to talk about bringing division rather than peace, especially among families — dividing fathers and sons, mothers and daughters, mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law, though he doesn’t get all the credit for the latter... But all kidding and reality checks aside, Jesus seems like a homewrecker here, in addition to being some kind of spiritual pyromaniac!

Where is the Jesus who said, “Come to me, all you who are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest (Matthew 11:28).”? Didn’t the angels say Jesus would bring peace (Luke 2:14)? And what kind of baptism is he talking about here? Didn’t John already baptize him? If we are confused by this text, it’s because we are paying attention. Is this the same Jesus we have come to know and love?

It is the same Jesus, though this is a message of his we try to avoid. But it is a message we need to hear, a central part of his mission. It just needs a little unpacking and clarification, not to dilute the force of the message but to help us understand it better.

The place to begin is with the reality that the fire Jesus comes to bring is not destructive. It is a bit like God’s wrath which is not a means

of destruction but a last-ditch effort to get people to change their course. When Israel is given up to God's wrath, it is not the end. It is God's way of getting them back, albeit a difficult way, as the nation is exiled.

Like wrath, fire can be an instrument of good, a way of cleaning the house, to use an image in today's anthem. A refiner's fire purifies precious metals. Some forest fires are set for environmental reasons. The one parsonage we lived in was sold to a nearby community college and later burned by the fire department in a training exercise.

The fire Jesus brings is this kind of fire. It is not destructive. He comes to bring transformation of people and society, and some of this happens through gentle teaching, kindness, and love, but some of it requires more difficult change, more like the change a fire makes possible. It is ultimately healing and redemptive, but it is not always comfortable nor is it always under our control.

On an individual level, I think of a character named Jack on the Netflix series *Virgin River*. Go ahead and smile or groan; Dana and I watch what some think of as an evening soap opera... In the latest season, Jack is struggling with alcohol abuse. Various parts of his history trigger the struggle, which becomes its own problem with multiple consequences. But the bottom line is that he needs to address the problem, and doing that will not be easy. It will require courage and vulnerability, a willingness to look inside and delve into the past, not to mention changing his behavior, but healing will be worth all the effort.

So it goes with every difficult change in our lives. It's not a matter of subtle adjustments, it's more a fire burning away what is destructive, what hinders us, what holds us back from wholeness. There is a character in C. S. Lewis' novel *The Great Divorce* who cannot make it to the mountains of heaven because of one thing that holds him back, a little red lizard that sits on his shoulder and leads him astray. An angel offers to help him by burning the lizard off, and the man wants to be whole, but he has grown fond of the lizard and is afraid the burning will hurt. He finally gets up the courage and accepts the angel's help, it is painful for a moment, but the man is made whole, and the lizard is transformed into a majestic horse which the man rides into the mountains of heaven. Such is the fire Jesus brings.

On a social level, I think of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "Letter from the Birmingham City Jail" and the context that caused him to write it. When Dr. King was put in jail for participating in a peaceful protest against discriminatory policies and the violence the government used to enforce them, a group of liberal white clergy criticized him for acting as an outsider, provoking the police and other leaders, being impatient, and acting like an extremist.

In his letter, Dr. King called out the naivete of these ministers, saying that tension is required to force necessary conversation, it is never the right time for the uncomfortable, and the word "wait" in regard to racial justice has always meant "never." "We will have to repent in this generation," he wrote, "not merely for the vitriolic words of the bad people, but for the appalling silence of the good people."

In regard to being called an extremist, he expressed gratitude. "Was not Jesus an extremist in love? 'Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, pray for them that despitefully use you.' Was not Amos an extremist for justice? 'Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like mighty stream.' Was not Paul an extremist for the gospel of Jesus Christ? 'I bear in my body the marks of the Lord Jesus.'"

It was a laser sharp response to the scolding he received. Difficult change on a social level always stirs criticism, but when the change is desperately needed, as it was and is in regard race, a little fire and all that it brings, even a little extremism, is not only okay, it is necessary. Such is the fire Jesus brings and at times calls us to kindle.

So, the fire Jesus brings is not destructive. The division he brings is not an end in and of itself. It is the inevitable result of Jesus being who he is, proclaiming the truth he must, being the advocate for justice and peace he is called to be. We may get this on some level but still wonder if Jesus' calling divides families. It did in the first century, when becoming a follower of Jesus within the Jewish community stirred tensions with family members who did not become one. It also created family challenges for Gentile believers, as well as conflict with Rome.

But does faith in Christ create family conflict today? It did for me, as it does for many who are raised outside the church. Becoming a Christian didn't put me at odds with my immediate family in every way, but it did create tension, and when I expressed a calling to go into ministry, a family member expressed disappointment, saying, "I always thought you would do something useful with your life."

Jesus' calling still creates divisions in families. It also creates divisions in churches and communities. It is not his intent, but nor is the kind of superficial peace that seeks to preserve a false sense of unity by avoiding uncomfortable truths required by justice and love. "Don't stir the water," we say, "We can't talk about that. People will get upset..."

To be clear, upsetting people is not the goal, but being held captive to the fear of stirring the water is something Jesus never was nor would he have his church to be. Genuine peace, *shalom*, is a deep-down condition of wholeness that cannot exist when truth and justice are avoided. There is no peace without justice, not just on an international level, but on a community level and an individual one. This means there will be tensions and divisions for a time, on the way to genuine peace.

Returning to "Letter from the Birmingham City Jail," in response to the clergy who scolded him for being an extremist who disturbed the peace, Dr. King pointed out that his peaceful protest was a response to the violence that was already being done to persons of color. There was no peace to disturb. Then, he said this.

The contemporary church is often a weak, ineffectual voice with an uncertain sound. It is so often the arch-supporter of the status quo. Far from being disturbed by the presence of the church, the power structure of the average community is consoled by the church's silent and often vocal sanction of things as they are. But the judgment of God is upon the church as never before. If the church of today does not recapture the sacrificial spirit of the early church, it will lose its authentic ring, forfeit the loyalty of millions, and be dismissed as an irrelevant social club.

Dr. King wrote these words in 1963. Being a prophet isn't just about predicting the future, but fifty-nine years later, these words seem prophetic in a predictive sense. In many ways, the church has neglected this part of our calling, and suffered much as a result. Jesus brings the kind of fire that leads to healing and transformation, he is willing to stir the water when necessary to bring near his realm of justice and love, and he calls us at times to be willing to do the same.

We may still wonder what all of this has to do with baptism, especially on a day when we have celebrated baptism. Jesus has already been baptized in water by John. So, that is not what he is talking about here. He is talking about his immersion in an entirely different way of life — one of sacrificial love and service, one of unlimited forgiveness and giving all for others, which describes his entire life, but is revealed most clearly by his death on a cross. And strange as it may seem to us, this is what he is anxious to be about now — the cross.

So, if this is what all this talk about fire and division is about, maybe it doesn't apply to us. This is Jesus' work. We just need to be baptized in water. But Jesus calls us to take up our cross. In Matthew 3:11, John the Baptist says Jesus will baptize us with the Holy Spirit and fire. And in Mark 10:38, after James and John, the sons of Zebedee, say they want to sit at Jesus' left and right in glory, he wonders if they are able to be baptized with his baptism, because that is what it will take. He is talking about living the kind of life he lived, giving all for others, bringing a kind of fire and, when necessary, risking division.

In baptism, we say "yes" to this way of life. In baptism, we are claimed in love by God and saved from all that would hold us back, but then we are set on fire by love and for love. The traditional way of putting this is to say that we confess Christ as our Savior and Lord, but the latter part simply means that we follow Jesus in a distinctive way of life. And as today's gospel reading informs us, we follow a Christ who brings fire and division, in addition to love and peace, or perhaps better put, as a means of making possible true love and peace.

May we find the courage to remain true to our baptismal confession, to live up to our calling, all of our calling!