

“I Come to Bring Fire!”

Proper 15, Year C – Luke 12:49-56

preached by the Rector at St. Paul's, Henderson, August 18, 2013

Lord, take my eyes and see through them. Take my lips and speak through them. Take my soul and set it on fire with love for thee. Amen.

Let's face it, shall we? This morning's Gospel text isn't the sort of thing that's going to make it onto inspirational refrigerator magnets. Up there between the kids' latest crayon drawings and your favorite recipe clipped from *Bon Appetite*, holding up the reminder from your vet to get the cat her shots, you're not likely to find, “I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled!”

Jesus' pronouncements here aren't likely to win any poster design contests at the National Council of Churches, either, and *definitely* not at the Interfaith Council. I mean, “Do you think I have come to bring peace on the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division!” just isn't going to have the same ecumenical ring as, say, “This is my commandment: that you love one another.” And I don't suppose this morning's text is the sort of thing you're going to see plastered to the bumper of anyone's car. Even those that are really into those little silver fish, or, “Honk if you love Jesus!” or, “If the rapture comes, this car will be without a driver” aren't likely to go for a sticker that proclaimed, “Father against son and son against father, mother against daughter...” etcetera.

These are tough words. And yet here they are, these so-called “hard sayings of Jesus.” Here they are, dangling out there amidst all his more popular, easier to understand, easier to *preach* sayings. Here they are, provoking and distressing and making us *squirm* a bit. Here they are. Like it or not, we *have* to deal with them.

And maybe that's just as well. Maybe we need to remember that as much as it is meant to satisfy and comfort, the Gospel is *also* meant to stir up and challenge. In the apathetic, “You do your thing and I'll do mine” world in which we live, maybe we need to be reminded that that was *not* the world into which Jesus spoke his message of the coming of the Kingdom of God. “I have a baptism with which to be baptized,” he said, referring to the journey to the condemnation of Jerusalem and to the cross of Calvary to which he had so resolutely set his face. “I have a baptism with which to be baptized,” he said, “and what stress I am under until it is completed!”

We are the heirs of centuries of the Church being the “good guys,” the cowboys in the white hats, riding over the hill to save the world, the men and women in *charge* of things. In the name of Jesus Christ and with the conversion of whole nations and whole societies, the Church has spread the good news of Christ's saving grace throughout the world.

Yet, somewhere during the last couple of millennia of world domination, we Christians have mislaid any understanding of what it's like to be the ones who are on the *outside*. With “In God we Trust” stamped into the coins jingling in our pockets, and the ten commandments decorating schools and parks, if not still a *few* courtrooms, we just have no idea what it's like to be the one whose prayers are not allowed to be prayed aloud. As much as we want to be like Jesus, we just don't understand how *our* baptism into that name could be the font of the kind of stress that Jesus is talking about.

Don't get me wrong, I for one am incredibly *glad* that we still live in a culture where Christianity is still celebrated, even if no longer assumed. But with that *assumption* slipping quickly into the past as our culture increasingly finds the Church irrelevant if not out-and-out incompatible, maybe we would do well to sit up and smell the passing of coffee hour as a cultural institution. Maybe we would do well, as we engage our increasingly apathetic, and sometimes even hostile culture, to listen to Jesus' hard sayings that the baptism with which we ourselves are baptized is meant to be as much a *challenge* as it is a comfort.

These sayings, I think, have something hard to say *within* the Church as well. Over the centuries the Church has done some pretty horrendous things in the name of Christ and his Gospel of love and grace. Some of those whole societies that were converted, we converted at the point of a sword or a gun.

The words of Holy Scripture have been twisted to not only *allow* but even *encourage* the subjugation of whole races and the marginalization of a whole list of “outsiders.” People have been burnt at the stake for not praying in Latin, for not praying in Greek, for not praying in *English*. Children of God have been excluded and enslaved and sometimes exterminated because of where their father’s fathers were born, or the color of their skin, or how they chose to worship. There is little doubt that, even today, the Church has a great deal for which to repent, and a great long way to go to make sure that words of Jesus’ commandment that we “love one another” is more than a bumper sticker or refrigerator magnet, that Jesus’ *commandment* is spoken in such a way that *all* are able to hear.

If we accept that Jesus’ hard sayings from this morning’s Gospel are *also* part of the Gospel, though, we must look to *another* fact as well: that division is as natural a consequence of the message of the Gospel as inclusion, and that there *is* a line between the righteousness revealed by the holy God, and our own feeble attempts to justify our own sinfulness. Certainly, the Church has too often drawn that line to support the prides and the prejudices and even the profits of the people that are already on the inside, and that we aren’t above doing so again. Certainly every time we *think* we have the right to draw such a line, we need to think again, and carefully and humbly evaluate our understanding of God’s revelation in Scripture in light of the tradition through which that revelation has been handed to us and in light of the reason God has planted in our hearts and minds. Certainly we of the Church today need to examine our motives and our momentum whenever we are tempted to proclaim, “this far and no further.” We need to take seriously the knowledge that, even at our best, we only see the truth of God as through a glass, *dimly*. But lest the Church become meaningless and impotent in the lives of the people of God, lest the Church become irrelevant and immaterial to those she is called to seek and to save and to serve, lest the Church become useless and repugnant to the One who has given her life, with the same breath with which we proclaim, “Yes, even we sinners are welcome,” the Church needs to be willing to say that in Jesus Christ we have found the *truth*.

“I came to bring fire to the earth,” Jesus said. The fire that he is talking about isn’t for cute refrigerator magnets. That fire isn’t for warming our brandy or toasting fluffy, self-congratulatory, *Kumbaya* marshmallows. The fire that burned within Jesus’ own heart as he set his face toward Jerusalem, the fire that drove Jesus’ heart as he looked toward the pain and rejection and suffering of Golgotha, the fire that *consumed* Jesus’ heart as he look with hope *beyond* that suffering to the fulfillment of the *Father’s* will, that fire is meant to burn *away* our ignorances. That fire is meant to incinerate our prejudices and our intolerances. That fire is meant to forge within *us* hearts that see the light of Christ in *every* face. The fire that caused Jesus Christ to offer his own *self* to pay the cost of your sins and mine, is meant to consume all our fears and all our inhibitions. That fire is meant to enliven and empower us to reach out to a world hungry to hear the message of Christ’s mercy and grace.

The fire that burned away the power of sin and death that bright Resurrection morning, is meant to burn into every crease and crevice of our hearts, and to swallow up every speck of sin in our lives. That fire calls us day by day to a new life of faithfulness, and righteousness, and love. And oh how I pray that such a flame may be *continually* kindled in my heart, and in your heart, and in our life together. Take our souls, Lord, and set them on fire with love for thee. Amen.