

Text: Luke 12: 41-53  
Title: A Controlled Burn  
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I was recently invited to speak to a rhetoric class about persuasive speech. As a “practitioner in the field” I was asked to share the “role persuasion plays in sermon design and delivery.”

I don’t think I’ve ever thought about it that way.

Am I trying to persuade you of something?

I know that I’m trying to be faithful to the text – and be winsome, witty, and not overly wordy. Most Sundays I try to find a hook that grabs your attention. I usually anchor the sermon in some sort of honest question and into that undercurrent of existential angst or anxiety I try to communicate good news – don’t be afraid, you belong God. When it’s all over I hope someone says, “Good sermon.” But, am I trying to persuade you of something?

Clearly Jesus missed class on the day when they taught persuasive speech. His opening hook is terror, his existential question can be interpreted as the threat of hell, and the good news is that there will fire and division.

Good sermon, Jesus?

You’re not going to build a mega-church with that kind of rhetorical tact.

Dear friends, when Jesus is harsh and unsettling and traffics in persuasion by fear what are we to do? What are we to make of a Jesus who brings fire and divides families against one another? What are we to do with a Jesus who promises that the unfaithful servant will be sliced and diced and given a good beating?

One consistent critique of my preaching is that I’m not clear about eternal damnation. In trying to persuade you about the love and mercy of God I’m not clear enough that scripture can be read as pointing toward punishment for some. So, these are the words of Jesus,

*The master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him and at hour he is not aware of. He will cut him to pieces and assign him to a place with the unbelievers.*

As that is helpful, so be it....

But, dear friends, I want to draw your attention to the claim of Jesus that he came to bring fire. Throughout scripture fire, as a metaphor, has an open-ended quality. It is used to image judgment, and the refinement of impurities, and the presence of God. It is

employed as an image for the Holy Spirit and the purging of evil. Fire is a shape-shifting metaphor, but maybe the constant is that wherever there is fire there is change.

Therefore, when Jesus barks out that he came to bring fire,  
he is not talking about a Kum-ba-yah campfire glow,  
or the heart “strangely warmed” as John Wesley wrote in the 1700s,  
or the burning hearts of two disciples walking the road to Emmaus,  
but the fire of change.

There is a great black spiritual that includes the line, “God gave Noah the rainbow sign,  
no more water but fire next time.” I like the idea of that fire.

I long for the day when fire will burn away injustice,  
and the suffering of innocents,  
and the ravages of addiction,  
and the wages of war,  
and the scourge of cancer.  
I long for the fire that will put this world to rights.

Come Lord Jesus.  
Get some kindling.  
Strike a match.  
Bring the fire of change.

And yet...

The backcountry roads where I ride my bike cut through row after row of corn and soybeans ~ green and growing for as far as the eye can see. In the middle of that rural range there is a regional volunteer fire station with a sign that gives a number to call if you're planning a “controlled burn.” If you're going to burn out the weeds in your ditch, they want to know. If you going to clear away a field of briars and thistles with fire, they want you to give warning.

I like the idea of a controlled burn.

If Jesus is going to spark the fire of change, I like the idea of setting the parameters. I want just enough fire to burn off the rough edges and singe off some bad habits. I want just enough fire to gather the family around, but not enough to set us against one another. I want the warmth of the fireplace, not a wild fire that burns the house down. I want a firewall that protects what I don't want to change. I want a controlled burn.

But, that doesn't seem the spirit of Jesus' sermon. Jesus proclaims that the fire of change will blaze in such a manner that economic realities will be flipped over and family priorities will get re-shuffled.

Now, I don't think that the dynamics of first century Palestinian family life, under Roman occupation, overlap easily to the experience of middle-class-middle-American families. There's not an easy parallel for the disruption and persecution

that came with following Christ when this text was written. (Today Christians in Syria, North Korea, and northern Nigeria might know something of the cost of the kingdom and the ravages of fire....)

And yet...

And yet, I can't shake the notion that God would do more, demand more, expect more, and change more than we imagine. I can't shake the notion that the desire of God's heart is for more than the controlled burn in which we take comfort. Perhaps we've stressed one aspect of Jesus' message at the exclusion of others. Perhaps we've stressed peace and not disruption. Perhaps we've presented Jesus as a way to security and blessing, but we've failed to see Jesus reshuffling priorities and commanding, demanding a costly obedience.

My friend, Jim, is a recovering alcoholic. He's been sober for better than 20 years, but most every week he goes to a couple AA meetings, and almost every day he talks with guys who are trying to get and stay sober. I've marveled, time after time, when Jim's phone rings with some guy looking for help and Jim talks, "alchy to alchy," as only alcoholics can.

A few years ago, when an AA brother was dying, Jim was there at his bedside, praying with the family, and sitting with his friend. And when it came time to gather for the funeral the family asked Jim to offer the meditation.

Jim talked about the fire of change. Not the fire that we try to manage, not the fire that we think we can control, but the fire that slowly burned change in two men's lives. In Jim's words:

*A transformation took place. With the discovery that God could do for us what we were powerless to do for ourselves, came a gradual awakening and a self-awareness that God was in control. Fear became less the ruler of our lives and love began to take over. God began helping us do things outside our normal pattern of selfish reflex. God became more and more the center of our universe that we ourselves had always been....*

In AA speak it's the "higher power." And sobriety is linked not to controlling the burn but to acknowledging powerlessness and inviting or allowing the fire to blaze ~ wherever it will.

Dear friends, is there the possibility that fire would come and change us?

Is there the possibility that fire would sear through scripture and sacrament and change us enough so that we wouldn't fit the patterns of this world? Is there the possibility that even here, even now, even at Hope Church, God would light a new fire for justice, for renewal, for mercy, for peace, for change of the status quo? Or, is this it for us? Are we good?

Is there something in your life that God burn away for something new?

Barbara Brown Taylor puts it this way...

*There is some fine teaching about the Holy Spirit, and I hope none of you are satisfied with it. I hope none of you rests until you have felt the Holy Spirit blow through your own life, rearranging things, opening things up and maybe setting your head on fire. There is nothing you can do to make it happen, as far as I know except to pray, "Come, Holy Spirit" every chance you get. If you don't want anything to change in your life, then for heaven's sake don't pray that, but if you are the type of person who likes to stand out on the porch when there is a storm moving through so you can feel the power that is pushing the trees around, then you are probably a good candidate for the Holy Spirit prayer.*

May that be our prayer: Come, Holy Spirit.

Do more than persuade us.

Do more than strike fear in our hearts.

Come as fire to change us.

Come as fire to make us more fully human, more fully faithful.

Come even here, even now, even at this table.

Amen.