

Text: Luke 12: 49-56  
Title: A Controlled Burn  
Date: 08.14.22  
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I'm fairly confident that the scholars who construct the Revised Common Lectionary buried this text in the dog days of summer because few know what to make of it and fewer want to preach on it. Savvy pastors are on vacation this week – or they're hoping the congregations they serve are squeezing in one more weekend away before school starts. You don't build big-family-friendly-churches with passages like this. As one fine preacher wrote of Luke's inclusion of these lines, "I wish that a gust of wind had scattered all his notes and blown that page away."

But, dear friends, this is the text we have....

This is not Jesus calling children to his knee and welcoming the marginalized to the table; this Jesus at his harsh unsettling best. A Jesus who divides families against one another? What are we to make of that? What can we learn here from the Master? How can we hear the voice of God – even in this?

*I have come to bring fire on the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled....  
Do you think I came to bring peace on earth? No, I tell you, (not peace) but  
division....*

Let's start there....

Fire is a multivalent biblical image.

It represents the presence of God — think the pillar fire in Exodus or the tongues of flame at Pentecost. It can also represent eschatological judgment — in John's Revelation Satan and his minions are consumed by fire. And in the Old Testament, the prophets liken God's intention to purify Israel to a refiner's fire purifying silver.

You get the idea. Biblically speaking, fire is a shape-shifting metaphor that can be understood as the presence of God, as judgement, or as purification. Maybe the constant being that wherever there's fire there's change...

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

There's an old black spiritual that includes the line, "God gave Noah the rainbow sign, no more water but fire next time." In the early 1960s James Baldwin picked up on that line for his book about race in America, "The Fire Next Time."

There's a fire a comin' that will bring change.

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

Get some kindling.

Strike a match.

Bring the fire of change.

Thy kingdom come...

And that's to say, the division of which Jesus speaks is a result of the fire he bears. The kingdom of God he proclaims is set over against the empires of this world.

A kingdom not by right or might but by forgiveness. A kingdom not by fear ("be not afraid") but by faith, not by power but by humility. A kingdom not by religion but by love, sacrifice, death, and resurrection.

Therefore, those invested in this present order, in the empires of wealth and power, will resist the coming kingdom for it spells an end to their ordering of things. Hence, Jesus — though coming to establish a rule of peace — brings division, even to the most intimate and honored of relationships, like those among family.

Christian denominations of all stripes meet in the summer to do business. They deal with issues of theology, church order, and public policy. They make their plans and at their best they face their failures. These summer meetings are not unlike family reunions — there's joy, hope, reconnection, and usually division. One part of the family is often bickering or splintering off for one reason or the other.

This summer has been no different. Lutherans, Methodists, Presbyterians, Episcopalians, Baptists, and Reformed folks have all struggled with issues of sexuality and sex abuse. In the wake of the CRC's decisions about human sexuality a prominent pastor posted that now they could begin the work of ridding the denomination of "rot." My guess is many are praying the same — that a fire would purify, burn away the chaff, and the kingdom would come. To many it feels like family divided against family.

Again, throughout scripture fire is used to image judgment, the refinement of impurities, and the presence of God. It's employed as an image for the Holy Spirit and for the purging of evil. We'd be well served to be humble and cautious with fire....

The flat-far-south-suburban-roads where I ride cut through fields of corn and soybeans that are green and growing as far as the eye can see. But, in the middle of that rural landscape there's a 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 them warning.

I like the idea of a controlled burn.

If Jesus is going to kindle 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.

That doesn't seem to be the spirit of Jesus' sermon. Jesus proclaims that the fire of the kingdom-change will blaze in such a manner that family priorities will get re-shuffled.

Now, I don't think that we can adequately overlap the dynamics of first century Palestinian family life to middle-class-middle-American families or denominational dynamics. There's no easy parallel. The disruption, persecution, and cost of following Christ for Jews living under Roman occupation is incomprehensibly different than our contemporary situation. Present day Christians in Afghanistan, North Korea, Somalia, or Libya know something of the cost of the kingdom and the ravages of the fire, but most of us want the fire to be contained.

We want the fire of revival,  
we want the fire of inspiration,  
we want the fire of judgement against injustice,  
but we don't want to get burned....

Lately I've been reading frivolous legal thrillers that dance around the edges of race, injustice, and corruption, but they mostly just keep you turning pages. However, one line, early in one novel, stuck with me. A crusading idealist says,

*I've learned that most people don't want change, even when it's in their best interest. We pay lip service to ideals, but we live with expediency and by tribal prejudice. Accepting this hypocrisy has nearly broken me.*

I think he's right. Perhaps we've sought the comfort and convenience of expediency and tribal prejudice rather than the desires of God's heart. Perhaps we've stressed one aspect of Jesus' message at the exclusion of others. Perhaps we've stressed peace and not disruption. Perhaps we see Jesus as a way to security and blessing, but we've failed to see Jesus reshuffling priorities and demanding a costly obedience.

Dear friends, is it possible that fire would come and change us?

Is it possible that the Holy Spirit would seep 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 a change of the status quo? Are expediency and tribal prejudices enough, or would God burn something new?

I'm reminded that in AA sobriety is linked not to controlling the burn but to acknowledging powerlessness and inviting or allowing the fire to blaze – wherever it will.

Part of a robust faithful Christian life is being open to the movement of the Spirit. Our confessional confidence is that the Holy Spirit is alive in us and among us comforting, challenging, interpreting scripture, and pointing us toward Christ. Let us not control the burn.

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.

Come as fire to change us.

Come to burn away injustice.

Come to burn away all that is counter to the kingdom.

Come to shape us, lead us, guide us, and make us more Christ-like – even here, even now.

Amen.