Pentecost 13C / August 18, 2013 / Luke 12:49-56

Across one wall of a church fellowship hall in Texas is a large painting. It shows Jesus sitting on a sunny hillside meadow, bright with spring flowers. Sheep are grazing here and there. Gathered around Jesus are children—children all above average in their smiles and glistening clothes. One young child sits in Jesus’ lap, while all faces gaze up toward the Lord. A kind smile graces the Savior’s face. Love is everywhere, while off in the distance, barely visible, are the sun-spangled buildings of Jerusalem.

As we look at this scene, we think, “What a friend we have in Jesus.” Or perhaps, “Softly and tenderly, Jesus is calling.” That’s one picture from the Bible that we have of Jesus. But it is not the only one. Our Gospel reading this morning offers another.

“I came to bring fire to the earth,” Jesus is saying, wild eyed and shouting, perhaps. “…[H]ow I wish it were already kindled!” And he doesn’t stop there. He speaks of a baptism by fire that he will face and the stress that he feels. “Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division!” And then he lays out what it means: one relative pitted against another, human relationships thrown into chaos.

So then, who is Jesus? Is he a gracious smiling Savior on the hillside with a child in his lap? Or is he a fire and brimstone preacher? The answer is yes. He is both. He is both Savior and Prophet. A God of grace and of justice too.

In today’s Gospel, Jesus is having a prophetic day. He is forcefully proclaiming what is coming. In that Fellowship Hall painting, Jerusalem is in the background, off to one side, just barely visible. But for Jesus, Jerusalem is front and center. Jesus knows what will happen there.

In the ninth chapter of Luke, we read: “When the days drew near for Jesus to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem.” It is the cross that awaits him—a baptism by fire. Some will understand the powerful truth of his death and resurrection, some will not. Some will follow him, some will run away. It will cause division for some, but community for others.

We knew this was coming long before this Holy Week in Jerusalem. One morning outside the Temple there, the righteous man Simeon meets the baby Jesus and his parents. Simeon has been waiting for years to get a glimpse of the Messiah. So when the old man sees the baby Jesus, he sings of the child’s greatness. “My eyes have seen your salvation, O God,” he sings.

But do you remember how the scene ends? Simeon follows his song with a warning to Mary: “This child is destined for the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too.”

Which is to say: when the truth shows up, human beings get nervous and chaos ensues. The truth always brings division. Look at King Herod. He knows the truth of the birth of this new king, Jesus, and instead of bowing down before him, he seeks to kill him. When the rich young ruler meets Jesus the Truth, and Jesus tells him to sell all he has and give it to the poor, and then come follow him, the rich man goes away sad. The truth always brings division.

So when Jesus announces there will be division and baptism by fire, he is not being prescriptive, that is, it is not his purpose to set children against parents are vice versa. No, Jesus is being descriptive. He is describing what will happen when the truth shows up, hanging there on the cross.

One of the surprising things I’ve learned as a pastor, lo these many years, is how easily family members can be divided. Nowhere is this more obvious than when there is a death of an elderly family member and no legal will has been made.

This happened in a congregation I once served. The patriarch of the family owned hundreds and hundreds of acres of ranch land, with a river winding through it. At this man’s death, it was discovered he left no will. His four adult children had to decide how to divide the land. Now, you might think it would be simple enough; you just divide up the acreage equally, right? So if there were a thousand acres each child would receive two hundred fifty. Simple, right? O how naïve we are!

It turned into a free-for-all between the children. One claimed he was loved the most by the father and therefore should inherit most of the land. Another claimed that she had done far more for that elderly parent than anyone else and should be rewarded. Of course, all of the children wanted access to the river. This dispute continued for years. The children no longer talked to each other; only the lawyers talked to each other.

Well, that’s one kind of family. But Jesus speaks of another kind of family—the family he will establish through his life, death, and resurrection. The family he will create begins in the water and word of baptism. The cross is at the heart of this family—a birthmark on our foreheads. On the cross the power of sin, evil, and death meet their match. Brothers and sisters of Christ will know the truth and the truth will set us free.

Jesus has set his face to go to Jerusalem. And as one theologian has said, “A God willing to die for us and for this creation has no patience with those who do not grasp the urgency of his pilgrimage to Jerusalem, his mission there, and his life’s work.”

Jesus speaks urgently of fire, and baptism, and division. He has a death to die and a new family to create. It will be a family where all are welcome and where love will reign.

Rachel, Susanna, and I have a friend named Tina who just graduated from Gustavus and has begun her nursing career on the west coast. We’ve known her all her life. In fact, Rachel and I are godparents to her older brother.

Last spring, Tina came by to see us one night and caught us just as we were leaving for a family birthday meal. We invited her along.

A few days later, I got a card from Tina. She wrote:

“I still feel a little guilty for crashing your birthday celebration with the family. Family means a lot to me, so I can understand how precious events like these are. To resolve the cognitive dissonance, I think I’ll just join the family.” And then she continued, “I’m really not too far off. Old friends that live far away seem more like extended family members anyway. And you and Rachel are Nathan’s godparents, so that makes me your god…niece?

“Or I could simply state that we are all sisters and brothers in Christ, and there’s no arguing with that, is there.

“So in conclusion, I’d like to say happy birthday…. Thank you for allowing me into your family.”

Tina got it right. You and I too are part of the same family. That is the truth. There’s no arguing with that, is there. The Crucified and Risen Christ embraces us all. And in that great gift of love, we will find peace.

Amen.