

Sermon for August 14, 2016

Luke 12:49-56

Pastor Alan Bray

Grace and peace to each of you in the name of Jesus, our Savior, our Shepherd, our Lord. Amen

A week ago yesterday, Gretchen, Julia and I attended the wedding of my brother's daughter Naomi in Missoula, Montana. It was a wonderful wedding – though not at all what had been originally planned. You see, the wedding was to have taken place an hour south of Missoula in a lovely country setting in the Bitterroot Valley. But five days before the wedding, thanks to some careless campers, a forest fire erupted in the mountains to the west. And before anything could be done, that part of the valley was in imminent danger and evacuation notices went out all over the area. So, long story short, the Roaring Lion forest fire made it necessary to relocate all wedding-related activities to Missoula. A lot of last minute adjustments...and yet, everything worked out just fine.

Given this brush with fire and other similar stories in the news these days, I'm more than a little sensitive to Jesus' opening words in our gospel reading this morning: "I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled...Do you think I've come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division."

What's going on here? What's all this talk about fire and disruption? Where is our soft-spoken, comforting, reassuring Jesus? The one who says, "Come to me, you who are weary, and I will give you rest." The one who says, "Don't let your hearts be troubled...where I am going, you will be also."

Well, truth be told, it's the same Jesus, but the context here is crucial. In today's reading from Luke, Jesus is speaking to his disciples as they begin the final journey to Jerusalem...where Jesus' opponents are growing in number and wait for his arrival...where the cross looms in the distance.

Jesus is no dummy. He's well aware that his ministry, his teachings and his public acclaim have created enemies – among the Jewish establishment, among the rich and the privileged, among the Romans in power, among many others who feel threatened by the kinds of change Jesus is determined to bring about.

In part, when he says, "I came to bring fire to the earth", Jesus is simply calling a spade a spade. You'll recall that much earlier in Luke's Gospel, Jesus had read

from the scroll of the prophet Isaiah in the synagogue and then he claimed those words for himself:

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

It's important to remember that Jesus did not claim this mission statement lightly or naively. Jesus understood full well that his ministry would necessarily cause great alarm and anxiety among the rich, the privileged, the captors, the oppressors, and the powerful.

Every time Jesus spoke or acted on behalf of the "the other," he fanned the flames of opposition and hatred. Whenever he healed on the Sabbath OR took the side of the poor OR lobbied for peace in a violent world OR opened his arms to the unclean, to widows, to eunuchs, to Gentiles, to prostitutes, to foreigners and to criminals, he set himself up for criticism and resentment on the part of those who had a heavy interest in keeping things as they were.

Jesus understood all of this. He knew what Dietrich Bonhoeffer would famously say thousands of years later...that such fiery opposition and vitriolic hatred was quite frankly, "the cost of discipleship." Jesus understood that fire and division were part and parcel of the cost of serving God with all one's heart and soul and being. The cost of living for justice, mercy, grace and reconciliation.

But let's make this a bit more personal, shall we? What do Jesus' words about fire and division have to do with us?

Well, I don't think it's out of line to imagine that there's a similar kind of critique at stake for the way in which we live out our lives as disciples of Jesus Christ. Some might even say that the best way to test the vitality and the effectiveness of our efforts at discipleship might be to see how much fire and disruption our efforts have brought about.

Professor R. Alan Culpepper injects this perspective: "Because our commitment to Christ shapes our values, priorities, goals and behavior, it also forces us to change old patterns of life, and these changes may precipitate crises in significant relationships." (The New Interpreter's Bible, Luke, p. 267)

In other words, the closer you follow Jesus, the more it will affect your family life, your community involvement, your personal reputation, your financial activity, your political principles, and your fundamental loyalties.

The more your life is lived in passionate pursuit of justice for people of all colors, mercy for the oppressed, economic equity for the poor, sustainability for God's creation, equal rights for the LGBTQ community...and countless, similar objectives in the name of Jesus, the greater the likelihood of resistance and opposition to your efforts.

But it's worth it, Jesus seems to say. It's a fire that needs to be flamed.

Just ask Martin Luther or Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. or Dietrich Bonhoeffer or Oscar Romero or Daniel Berrigan or Jim Wallis or Pope Francis or a host of other saints who have devoted their lives to creating a just and merciful world. These disciples all seem to echo a phrase I've seen and heard at Gustavus Adolphus College the past few years: "Make your life count!"

I think that's in part what Jesus is saying. We're not called to be lukewarm Christians, wishy-washy disciples, "nominal" members of the Church, half-hearted followers of Jesus. Either we're in the ballgame or we're not. And if we're in, Jesus Christ promises to burn away the parts of our lives which stand in the way of "making our lives count."

Now, I'd be the first to admit that I haven't done justice to this little text from Luke...there's much more to be said and thought about. But I believe Christ's words here to be wonderfully exciting and even inviting. If you are up for some adventure, for some excitement, for some challenge, for some change, for some deep-rooted satisfaction...then hang on tightly to the folds of Jesus' robe. We will be amazed at where he takes us. It may not always be easy, but it will be the most meaningful ride of our lives.

One final thought. In a couple of weeks, we will begin our Fall Stewardship Appeal with a seven-week look at Christian discipleship...seven faith practices involved in following Jesus more closely. I'm excited about what that might mean for you and me...and for our congregation. This all starts on August 28. I hope you'll be here. Amen