

Preacher: **Pastor Twyla**
Scripture: **Luke 12:49-56**

⁴⁹ *I have come to cast fire upon the earth, and how I wish it were already ablaze!* ⁵⁰ *I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what constraint I am under until it is completed!* ⁵¹ *Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division!* ⁵² *From now on five in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three;* ⁵³ *they will be divided: father against son, and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law.*”

He also said to the crowds, “When you see a cloud rising in the west, you immediately say, ‘It is going to rain,’ and so it happens. ⁵⁵ And when you see the south wind blowing, you say, ‘There will be scorching heat,’ and it happens. ⁵⁶ You hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present time?

“I have come to cast fire upon the earth. “ (NRSV) “This is serious business we’re involved in. My mission is to send a purging fire on the earth!” (The Voice translation) “I came to set the earth on fire.” (Good News), “I am come to send fire on the earth.” (KJV) All of these translations send a message to wake us up to the fact that God sent Jesus to earth to take care of some serious business. He wasn’t messing around, he says, so pay attention.

In Jewish thought, fire is almost always the symbol of judgment. Jesus here, regards his coming—the coming of his kingdom—as a time of judgment. William Barclay writes, The Jews firmly believed that God would judge other nations by one standard and themselves by another; that the very fact that a man was a Jew would be enough to absolve him.” We know this is not true. Just the same, just because one calls him or herself a Christian, and is that only by name, does not mean he/she will escape God’s judgement. His words to some sound so very harsh, maybe even unbelievable, because it just doesn’t sound like the Jesus—they want to know.

Today’s scripture is one of the most challenging for some Christians to understand. It only makes sense then that those who are not Christians and those who are new to the faith find it to be a stumbling point in their acceptance of Jesus.

Scriptures also tell us that Jesus as the Prince of Peace, which is more comforting to us. One of Charles Wesley’s well-known hymns begins with, "Gentle Jesus, meek and mild, look upon a little child ..." It’s confusing and perhaps troubling, then, to us when we hear the words that Jesus spoke in today’s text and compare it to the words he spoke in John 14:27, "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid." How then can it be that Jesus is both the giver of peace and the cause for division, as Jesus says in today’s text, perhaps even causing division in our most cherished relationships such as family?

I am here to tell you today that it is not the person Jesus who brings division into our relationships with others—it is his call on our lives and our acceptance of that call. The call of Christ overrides any other loyalty, any other commitment, and any other relationship. The call of Christ overrides logic. The joy of relationship with Christ overrides any fear. There is no greater joy than relationship with Jesus Christ.

In this text, Jesus is just being honest with us; he is just telling the truth—that following him wasn’t meant to be easy or comfortable. It is a reality that one of the difficulties of following Jesus is that it could strain or even end relationships as we have known them with some very

special people in our lives. Yet, we must put Christ first and at the very center of our lives, above all things, above our own comfort and above all other people. To say that Jesus Christ is our Lord and Savior is to say that our modern-day idols—whatever form they may take—are not the rulers or saviors of our lives!

Francis Bernardone was born at the end of 12th century. His father was a wealthy cloth merchant and had high hopes for his son. He became a knight in a war with a neighboring province, and had a fabulous future in front of him. His father was proud of his son, but the problem was that Francis kept going to church and praying, asking God what he wanted him to do. Over time, he became convinced that God did not want him to be a dashing knight, but rather to be a follower of Christ, a genuine disciple. God wanted Francis to serve the poorest of the poor, and in those times there were a lot of very poor people.

Francis heard the scriptures say, “Sell all that you have and give it to the poor” and took this as a personal call. He sold all that he had and gave it to the poor. He even changed clothes with a beggar, and spent time begging in the streets of Rome.

But his father took exception to all this since Francis had given away everything that his father had given to him. He had no urge to take the Bible literally like his son. He threw Francis in jail, then took him to court. Francis of Assisi (as he became known) said, “No longer is Pietro Bernardone my father for, from now on, my father is in heaven.” We might admire Francis for his heroic and noble stand and his persistence to follow the call of the gospel in spite of the cost. But the pain is real and lasting. He experienced first-hand the division that following Jesus can cause. Following Jesus sets father against son.

Francis of Assisi wasn't the first to feel the harshness and difficulty that came with following Jesus, nor is he the last.

The divisive element in Jesus' call reminds us that Jesus did not come so that we could have a happy life -- *though the peace of God contributes to us finding true happiness in our lives.* It reminds us that Jesus did not come so that we could get along with our siblings or other family members-- *though the peace of God may help us live with the conflict that may arise, and given the opportunity, one day release us from our own feelings of resentment and pride so as to be free to make the first move toward reconciliation.* It reminds us that Jesus did not come so that we could get along with our coworkers and neighbors, *though the peace of God may help us stay afloat during disputes.*

As Jesus spoke these words, he was very aware of what was on the horizon of his own life. In verse 50, he speaks of a baptism (NRSV) he must face, and he wishes it was over. He actually was speaking of the horrors of the crucifixion he would need to endure. This was to be his journey—it was why God sent him to earth. And as he hung on the cross and awaited death to arrive, he would endure unimaginable spiritual pain caused by complete separation from God, because he would be bearing the sin of the world, humanity's rejection, disobedience and unfaithfulness to God. Jesus, like others who follow him, would be a victim of the divisiveness he brought to the world. People wanting him to be who he was not and to do what he did not come to do therefore, rejecting him; vs. Jesus followers, embracing with trust and obedience and love, the Savior of their souls. At first it looks like the side that revels in the divisiveness won the battle over the One proclaiming living the heart of God among them—the loving and peaceful heart of God. But we know it did not win in the end. Jesus rose from the dead, sent the Holy Spirit and now lives on to proclaim the truth through us.

So, the peace of God has to mean something other than the absence of pain, struggle and conflict, something other than what we can acquire because we have the desire or need to live a

comfortable existence. The Bible teaches us that the peace of God is something like a magnetic center of calm toward which the person who is committed to Christ is drawn back in the midst of or after turmoil. The peace of God is an anchor that keeps us from being swept away in the storms of life. Frederick Buechner says that "for Jesus, peace seems to have meant not the absence of struggle, but the presence of love."

Here's a story about someone who knew firsthand this peace and then allowed it to guide her. When the Nazis occupied Holland, Corrie ten Boom was a middle-aged woman who lived with her father and sister and worked with them in the family watch shop. She made no particular decision to become a part of the underground. She made lots of little decisions, though, to follow Christ. She helped to place hundreds of Dutch Jews in hiding in the countryside. Soon there were several Jews living and hiding in her home. Corrie ten Boom chose to follow Christ in the face of the occupation. Eventually, she was imprisoned, first in Holland and then in a concentration camp in Germany. She survived, though her sister and her father and her nephew did not. Only one of the people who had been hiding in her home was ever captured; the rest survived the war.

Thousands of other Christians, whose names we will never know, in Germany and other parts of Europe, made little decisions to follow Christ, accepting the cost, and it made a difference. What if more had?

It's tempting to think that the call to discipleship only comes to the select few under extreme conditions such as war. But Jesus calls each one of us every day. We make decisions every day to follow or not to follow in how we spend our money and our time, how we relate to the people around us. These things are very important when it comes to following Jesus. In our time and place, the cost does not often go so far as imprisonment or death. But the division that can occur in relationships and other challenges that might arise because we are faithful can be as equally painful.

Jesus is the Prince of Peace, and the good news of even this difficult passage in Luke's Gospel is that Jesus came to set humanity on the right path again, and that the call of Christ creates a community that has something more important binding it together than just a family tree and shared genes.

Jesus came to start a fire—the fire of God's love and God's peace—and we are called to help fan the flames and set this world ablaze, above anything else we could do and above anything else that is important to us.

The evidence of the times, right now, reveals desperation and lostness. We hear the cries for help to escape suffering and injustice that the fallen values of the world inflict on humanity, **and** at the same time we know the saving grace and promise of the Gospel. Jesus, in verses 54-57, speaking to a predominately agricultural producing society uses an illustration about the ability of being able to interpret the natural signs signaling the types of upcoming weather, rain or sun, requiring a response to adequately care for crops.

Only a foolish farmer would ignore the signs and ignore caring for his crops as best he could. Likewise, self-proclaimed Christians see the evidence of a fallen world. They see also the signs of God's kingdom being built right before their eyes, yet they may intentionally ignore making a true commitment to Christ and the continuing work to build that kingdom. Jesus wants us to know that this is not the time to water-down the gospel; it's never a good time to intentionally ignore an opportunity to be love, Christ's love, to another in need; it's insanity to live a hypocritical lifestyle to the gospel we proclaim.

August 21 - Division in God's Household

It doesn't matter that some will call us fools. What does matter is that others will be enlightened to the truth. The pain we may experience from those who turn their backs on us and ridicule us will be nothing compared to the separation we would experience from God when we intentionally choose a path diverting our attention and love from Him and His will. Nothing will be more rewarding than to hear from our Almighty Creator: Well done my faithful servant, come into my kingdom. On the other hand God's judgement and rejection would be a pain beyond our human comprehension.

I learned a song that speaks to this theme when I was growing up during the Jesus movement. It's called, "Pass It On." *It only takes a spark, to get a fire going. And soon all those around, can warm up it it's glowing. That's how it is with God's love, once you've experienced it, it's fresh like spring, you want to sing, you want to pass it on.*

Let's gather around the fire with Jesus, be warmed and changed by it, and help him set the world ablaze at all cost. Amen.