

WHERE IS YOUR FIRE?
Sermon for August 15, 2010
Scripture: Luke12:49-56

How can the Jesus we know as the Christ Child, destined to bring peace on earth and good tidings to all, be the same Jesus that is in our gospel lesson today saying he will bring fire and division to believers? We are more use to bumper stickers and hymns that say Jesus Loves Us. I certainly have been known to focus on God as a nice God, a God of unconditional love. Jesus gives us many examples about this loving God. So what in the world is Jesus talking about in this Luke scripture? If you are familiar with the Bible you will remember that as early as his infancy, conflict was predicted for Jesus. When the old man Simeon blessed the infant Jesus, he told Mary that Jesus was destined to be in the midst of conflict and opposition, so much so that a sword would pierce Mary's soul. (Lk 2:34-35)

There are some sermons people do not want to hear because they contradict their dearly held values or their comfortable life styles. Jesus earned a reputation for preaching these kinds of sermons - sermons that were challenging and demanding, radical and divisive, such as our Gospel lesson for today. This reminds me of a story I heard about a Baptist pastor fresh out of seminary who was assigned to a small church in the hills of Kentucky. In his first sermon, he condemned gambling, especially betting on the horses. The sermon was not well received. "You see, Reverend," a parishioner explained, "this whole area is known for its fine horses. Lots of

our members make their living breeding race horses." The next Sunday the pastor spoke on the evils of smoking, and again, his sermon was not well received - for many of his members also grew tobacco. The third week the pastor preached on the evils of drinking, only to discover after that a major distillery was one of the town's largest employers.

Chastised for his choice of sermon topics, the frustrated pastor exclaimed, "Well, then, what can I preach about?" A kindly, older woman spoke up and said, "Pastor, preach against those godless Chinese communists. Why, there isn't a Chinese communist within 4,000 miles of here!"¹

Following the lectionary, we have been reading Luke ever since Christmas, and we are finally at the end of the 12th chapter. Let's look at the context for today's passage. This reading comes in the middle of a larger section that describes the dangers of greed, warns about watchfulness, readiness, and faithfulness. By now Jesus has set his face towards Jerusalem and his crucifixion. As he journeys on, Jesus becomes a source of much conflict and opposition as he begins to claim great power and authority. Jesus has been set on fire; Jesus has claimed his identity as the Son of God. In today's gospel reading he emphatically denies that following him will bring peace. He warns his followers of the cost of discipleship. He uses the important kinship, intergenerational ties to illustrate the division that will take place.

¹ Frank Rothfuss, "Jesus' Focus on the Family" found in e-Sermons.com.

The earthly world that Jesus was part of was deeply marred and scarred, unjust, with life-destroying power. It was a world that evidenced much suffering: poverty, slavery, exploitation, violence, ostracism of those that were different, no rights for women. Patriarchy was the social form; especially rich, white, male Roman's had great power over the rest of the population. Throughout the gospels Jesus refers to God's kingdom turning the present way of being and doing upside down. This kingdom cannot be brought about without confrontation in this kind of society. So when Jesus talks about fire and division, he's saying that his followers will be constantly challenged if they follow his teachings and that they must put the kingdom ahead of their loyalty to family ties. Why? Because for Jesus, God's kingdom is the most important thing there is, even more important than one's family. Family obligations are subordinate to God's kingdom.

We know that Jesus could show anger—remember the moneychangers in the temple; however, his anger was never self-righteous. Jerry Goebels says that Jesus' "anger was never self-protective or a 'sudden mood-swing'". His fury was an anger of advocacy; directed at any who stood between God's love and lost sheep."² Jesus' anger was directed against those that made life worse for the neglected, the forgotten, the vulnerable and oppressed.

What kind of anger do you have? On whose behalf are you so angry? Do you have a fire burning inside of you? What is it like? If Christ looked

² Jerry Goebel: 2007 © <http://onefamilyoutreach.com>

into my heart would he see a fire burning for anything worthwhile? Jesus is talking about a fire that would inflame people to care and to serve and to bless others. This fire can lead people through the darkness. Is this the kind of fire burning in you? What turns it on and how do you express it? How does your family feel about this fire? Or do they even know it is burning? When you make a decision to commit yourself to Jesus, you must be prepared for opposition from those that do not agree with you, those that think you are wasting your life, going in the wrong direction. If Jesus' fire takes hold of us, it can make us dangerous and divisive, a person that cannot be bought off or intimidated. I'm thinking of the Quaker Tom Fox, one of the team of Christian Peace Makers, who was kidnapped, tortured, and eventually killed in March 2006 by the opposition in Iraq. Here was a man who completely believed in living as Jesus lived which included being a pacifist and treating all, even one's enemies with respect and kindness. Tom had told his family and friends that if he were captured or killed they should not take revenge on those responsible.

I pray that I could have this combination of fire and peace within to fully react in love to all with whom I come in contact and even give my life if required. The command of love that Jesus emphasized stokes division with others and within our own hearts. It's not easy to follow Jesus. Tom Fox paid the ultimate price by giving his life. Neither the world nor the church will benefit from a lukewarm faith, so I call on all of you to honor and give thanks for that transforming fire that is available to you from our

Lord Jesus Christ. Do you hear Jesus calling to you, calling you outside the comfort walls into the life of the real world? Will you answer the call?

Where is your fire? Amen and Amen!