

Tenth Sunday after Pentecost
Luke 12:49-56
August 11th, 2019
The Rev. John Forman

Jesus said, "I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what stress I am under until it is completed! Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division! From now on five in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three; 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. And when you see the south wind blowing, you say, 'There will be scorching heat'; and it happens. 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?"

With the divisiveness already present in our lives these days, the last thing we need is a gospel reading that encourages still more division. And, at first glance, that may appear to be what Jesus is advocating for.

Luke's Jesus asks his followers: "Do you think that I have come to give peace on earth?" Well, actually, yeah, "Prince of Peace," we kinda took those angels seriously when they showed up in the shepherd's fields singing "Glory to God in the highest and *peace on earth* among people of good will." So, yes, this talk of fiery division has our attention, especially when we came together to hear a hopeful word or two.

Fortunately, once we get just beneath the surface of this reading, we discover that Jesus is saying something substantially different. Rather than encouraging divisions, Jesus is warning us that we create mostly destructive divisions when we take stands that rely on a foundation defined by "us" vs. "them."

Jesus knows, however, about other distinctions that rely on a deeper, timeless foundation; distinctions that lead to renewed life, if we will follow. Jesus did not come for the sole purpose of dividing people, and the unity that he wants to enkindle is not uniformity. Jesus is showing his followers a remarkable path to solidarity. And if we update our vocabulary with some Aramaic, we can begin to hear what this Jewish Jesus was talking about.

For starters, Jesus brings fire to the earth. The fire he brings is not a Hollywood spectacle of death and brimstone. That would require a devout Jew like Jesus to forget God's promise to Noah never to destroy on that scale ever again. Or we would have to accept that the God that we worship is not the God of scripture, and is instead some kind of two-faced deity who loves with unmatched generosity in one moment and obliterates with impulsive wrath in the next.

Jesus is talking about something else; something that escapes us that his first followers would have thought of fairly quickly.

As you travel through the Jordan Valley between the Dead Sea and the Sea of Galilee, you see mounds outside homes in some of the less settled areas. These mounds are clay-ovens that are fueled by dried and salted donkey, goat and camel dung. People still use these clay-ovens to bake bread as they have done since ancient days. In the Aramaic and Hebrew languages that Jesus spoke, the word that names this kind of bread-baking clay-oven is exactly the same word for "earth."

Jesus came to bring fire to light a creative oven, not to torch infidels. He is a catalyst that causes perspectives to clash; he inspires conflicts that take generations of generous and flexible interaction to come to new ways to live out the ancient relationship with God.

And most change of any real consequence, even change for the better, involves some mental, moral and emotional turmoil, if not outright grief because even positive change entails giving something up – cherished certainties, helpful rules, comforting experiences, being absolutely correct – we let some things die so that something else can have life.

And when it comes to Gospel change, as the old Southern Baptist line goes, "the Prince of Peace *is* the price of peace."

The fire that Jesus brings burns away at those actions and words that seek to preserve beliefs, attitudes and rules at all costs. The fire that Jesus brings challenges, revitalizes and updates our beliefs, attitudes and rules so that God can continue creating a world of love and compassion.

The resulting peace, the shalom, that God can grow in the openings we allow is never going to be found in perfectly ordered stillness. *Helpful* order happens when the people around us act according to understood social norms, and tend toward reliability and cooperation. It's a world of supportive structure, explored territory and familiarity. *Excessive* order eventually leads to the static silence of the tomb.

On the other hand, God's shalom will also not be found in purely spontaneous, utter randomness. *Useful* disarray happens when people experiment with unconventional social norms, and they can be a little quirky and challenging. It's a world of innovative novelty, extraordinary experiences and freshness. *Excessive* novelty leads to the unrestrained pandemonium of chaos.

And yet, when they overlap and interact with each other, the results can be phenomenal and quite literally awesome.

In the mid-90s, while I was doing research for a consulting firm, I studied the sciences of complexity with physicists, biologists, economists and others, mostly down in Santa Fe. Eventually, I published several papers and lectured at the National Defense University. And so, I can say with some authority that the fascination at the heart of the young sciences of complexity is the dance between order and chaos.

When they interact in certain environments, life emerges and thrives.

Order, the pull toward conformity, provides groups of people with helpful stability and consistency. Too much conformity will prevent people from adapting to changes in their environment. And chaos, the pull toward innovation, inspires individuals to move into the unknown to explore new paths. Too much innovation will tear a community apart.

When the two entangle with each other, it can *feel* divisive, like conflict, as it often actually is. Even so, from within all that discomfort, if we are flexible, curious and mutually respectful, new order can arise. God creates meaning in the ever-shifting border between the intertwined pair.

Complexity scientists consider this to be the dynamic zone that spawns unpredicted new structures, behaviors or ideas. Taoists call that borderland the path of life, the Divine Way. Jesus uses the metaphor of a community oven that produces bread, the staff of life.

Jesus focuses his metaphor on the tension arising in families, not on nations or ideologies or races. And that may tempt us to imagine that our world is far more conflicted; too sophisticated for this reading to apply. And in some ways, maybe that's true.

And yet, there is relief and remarkably pragmatic advice in this reading, even for us.

In the ancient world, the stress on family members was more than trivial. In fact, Jesus is naming one of their greatest fears. First century Mediterranean social lines were far stronger than ours. To be alienated from your family or clan could literally be a matter of life or death if you were cut off

from your kinship network, impressively full of in-laws that you wanted to keep in good graces.

What Jesus provides his followers is a focal point, a North Star for all of God's children to look to for guidance when the world around them feels like it is collapsing. The stress can be transcended in the interplay between order and chaos, and the best of the former order and the fresh insights can be brought together in something life-giving.

Jesus focuses his followers' attention on God, the creator who breathed life into the primeval chaos. When the earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep, the Spirit of God hovered over the chaos as God began creation.

When we struggle to read the signs of the times or feel like only destructive conflict surrounds us, Jesus invites us into the borderland where peace will be found: to that bread-baking oven where stability and conformity intermix with novelty and innovation, even as these appear to be at odds with each other. That's where the Risen Christ still meets us; in that creative womb where the heat of God's love revitalizes the Kosmos.

If we listen deeply with open hearts and minds, trusting God's guidance on the Divine path of life between order and chaos, we will feel the warmth of God's Holy breath filling creation with life and we will encounter a Word that welcomes us into our true kinship with all God's children.

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