

Pentecost 12C Proper 15 Sermon 081510
Isaiah 5:1-7; Psalm 80:1-2, 8-18
Hebrews 11:29-12:2; Luke 12:49-56

In the name of one God; Father, Son & Holy Spirit. Amen.

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!” This is one of those things Jesus says in the Gospels that make us very uncomfortable – those sayings that make us ask, “What happened to gentle Jesus, meek and mild?” I would submit to you that – while these sorts of Gospel sayings are often misquoted and otherwise misused – they point out a bigger issue ... that we must pay attention to the entirety of the Gospel if we really want to be disciples of Jesus Christ.

This morning’s Gospel reading comes at the end of a long section in which Jesus teaches – in a number of different ways – about the difficulties and demands of being a disciple. From the last half of chapter 11 through the middle of chapter 13, Jesus discusses: the evil of the current generation; the need for the religious leaders of the day to change their hearts and stop separating the people from a real relationship with God; the need to get rid of all of the things in life that interfere with our readiness to receive the Kingdom of God; and the absolute need to be ready (at any moment) for the return of the the “owner of the property” known as creation.

The first thing in the reading this morning is: “Jesus said, ‘I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled!’” In Biblical language references to

fire typically have to do with judgment or refining or purifying – usually by Divine action. That would typically be thought of as a reference to the Second Coming of Jesus and his judgment of the world. Some scholars though, have written that this mention of fire is designed to remind people of the prophet Elijah, who called down fire from the sky in order to “purify” (through death) the prophets of the god Baal. But as is almost always true in Biblical interpretation, there is another way of reading this passage that makes as much, or more sense.

Jesus referred to bringing fire to the earth and his desire that it was already kindled. After the Resurrection, Jesus *did* bring fire – in the form of tongues of flame above the heads of the Disciples. And He told the Disciples that this fiery, windy power was the Teacher and Comforter that He was going to leave with them because He would no longer be with them Himself – at least not in body. His next sentence supports this understanding of the passage because he told the Disciples that He had a baptism with which to be baptized – referring to the cross toward which He had begun His unwavering march. And a literal reading of the term that our Bible translates as “what stress I am under,” is the word “constrained.” So if Jesus knew what awaited Him in Jerusalem – that He would be arrested, beaten, humiliated and crucified – and if He knew that after His death He would rise again and ascend to Heaven (leaving the Holy Spirit behind) – then it makes sense that He would feel “constrained” in not being able to pass the Spirit along to His followers right then and there. But this understanding of Jesus’ use of the

term “fire” does not explain the remainder of the reading, in which Jesus says that He will be the cause of much separation between people. This is the point in this Gospel reading where each of us must decide whether we are going to try to read and accept the entirety of the Gospel or if we are only going to accept the parts that match up neatly with our mental picture of who Jesus was – and is.

I do not believe that Jesus was telling the Disciples that He came to the earth with the *mission of causing* separation between people. Rather, it seems that He was saying that His mission of bringing the Kingdom of God to people would always *result* in division and separation among people – because of people’s readiness (or lack thereof) to receive the Kingdom.

Way back in chapter 2 of Luke’s Gospel, when Jesus was an infant and was presented for circumcision, an old man named Simeon prophesied to Joseph and Mary. He said, “This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed” He closed his prophesy by telling Mary that “a sword will pierce your own soul too.” Simeon prophesied about the inevitability of separation.

The Rev. Dr. Will Willimon tells a story that illustrates this point very well. He says that when he was teaching at Duke Divinity School (during the days of Mao Tse Tung), he had a Chinese graduate student who came to him and told him a powerful conversion story. The man then asked Dr. Willimon to baptize him. After some

preparatory classes, Willimon says that the big day came. He describes the service as moving and powerful. There were photographs taken afterward and Dr. Willimon said that he wanted to make certain that the newly baptized man got copies to send home to his family. One of the other Chinese students told him not to bother. He said that the man would need to keep quiet about his conversion because the Chinese government would cut off his scholarship funding if it was discovered. But then, this Chinese student said something even more extraordinary. He told Dr. Willimon that the man's family had already let him know that if he went forward with the baptism, they would disown him because they could not have their son become Christian.

Before Jesus ushers in the time of eternal peace and justice for the whole earth, there will necessarily be a time in which people are separated one from the other. In Jesus' time, there was separation between His Disciples and the leaders of the synagogues and the Temple – a separation of those who followed Him from *everything* they thought they knew about God. And that same separation would be experienced by almost everyone who went through a “conversion” as they followed Jesus. The conversion of people to a belief in the Gospel of Jesus Christ all too often results in dissension and separation within families and communities.

And it even happens *within* the Body of Christ today. We separate ourselves from people who worship differently than we do. If they are too exuberant or boisterous, we get uncomfortable and want nothing to do with their worship practices. We separate

ourselves from people who believe differently from the way we do with regard to how we follow the admonition to “love your neighbor as yourself.” And most notably, we separate ourselves one from another because of the different ways in which we read Scripture.

Jesus says many things in the Gospels that some of us do not like – or things that make us uncomfortable. But if we are to take Jesus’ call to discipleship seriously, we have to “read, mark, learn and inwardly digest” them all – along with the rest of Holy Scripture. We must recognize that along the path of discipleship we will not all hear, understand or internalize the individual aspects of the Bible the same way. But ... if we read and study Scripture with the aid and support of the power of the Holy Spirit, we can weather those times of separation and can hopefully remain one Body of Christ – united by the hope of the Resurrection and bound together by the gentle bonds of common affection, supported by what the author of the Letter to the Hebrews referred to as that “great cloud of witnesses” who have gone before us and who are no longer separated by anything from the love of Christ.

And that brings us back to what I said before about reading and taking into account *all* of Scripture. It is incredibly easy to look through the Bible and lift sentences or paragraphs out of context in order to separate God’s people, one from another. But if we read, mark, learn and inwardly digest – by paying attention not only to the context, but to the overall arc of Scripture – we can see how the Bible can bring people together rather

than separating them. If you start at Genesis and end at Revelation (even when there are so many individual stories that can make us very uncomfortable) you can see that the overall story of God is a story of love, a story of unconditional love, a story of never ending love.

Jesus came to bring fire – and so He did. That fiery Holy Spirit is our guide, comforter and teacher. If we study all of Scripture – through the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit, we can see God's love reflected there. And while some people will inevitably be separated from each other – as disciples of Jesus, we can help our brothers and sisters grow together rather than apart, in the love of God and our Savior, Jesus Christ.

Amen.