

The Fiery Gospel

Luke 12:49-56

“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?”

Two of the texts in today’s lectionary, Jeremiah and Luke, talk about fire. “Is not my word like fire, says the Lord, and like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces?” Jeremiah writes. And in Luke’s Gospel, Jesus declares, “I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled!”

Fire is a compelling and yet confusing metaphor, especially in the ancient world. Fire brings warmth, but it can also bring destruction. Fire can consume your house and all of your earthly goods, but at other times – think of Jack London’s novel *To Build a Fire* – it spells the difference between survival and death. Fire chars, but it also purifies.

The ancient Persian religion of Zoroastrianism holds that fire is a medium through which we attain wisdom and spiritual insight. In the Hebrew Bible, a pillar of fire guided the ancient Israelites during their sojourn in the wilderness. God appeared to Moses in the burning bush. The Acts of the Apostles informs us that the Holy Spirit descended on the early church like tongues of fire. And in the Book of Revelation, Satan and his minions are eventually destroyed by fire.

So what are we to make of today's Gospel and, in particular, Jesus' references to fire? It's an odd text, in a way. Jesus seems to be testy in this passage. I've come to bring fire, he says. The gospel of Jesus, moreover, is divisive, pitting "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." No surprise there, I suppose, especially the part about mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law.

But Jesus, toward the end of the passage, returns again to the image of fire. Talking about our failure to discern the changing times, he notes that a wind from the South brings with it "scorching heat."

I'm inclined to believe that Jesus was looking for some "scorching heat" in those he was addressing. He had come to bring fire, he said, but somehow the fire among his followers had become tame. Through familiarity, perhaps, or complacency. Jesus reminds them – reminds us – that the gospel is fiery and divisive, and I wonder if maybe the early followers of Jesus had lost sight of that. Perhaps through familiarity or routine, they had lost touch with the radical fire of the gospel. In today's Gospel, Jesus is summoning them to reclaim the fire of the gospel, the "good news."

And so it is with us. There is a great temptation, I think, to diminish and domesticate the gospel, to forget its radical claims, to neglect both its transformative power and its demands to remember those Jesus called "the least of these." Coming to terms with this fiery gospel will reorient our

entire lives. It alters our relationship with God, but it also, as Jesus reminds us, alters our relationships with others, even members of our families.

I hope you'll forgive me for being self-referential for a moment. I come from a family of fundamentalists. I'm not naïve enough not to acknowledge my own shortcomings, of which there are many, but one of the perils of fundamentalism is self-righteousness and a tendency to judgment. I've felt the sting of their judgment many times, and I continue to do so.

My family doesn't care much for me or for my understanding of the gospel. When I talk about a gospel of "good news" or a theology that draws circles rather than lines, for example, a theology of inclusion, they write me off as a fool or a muddy-headed liberal or some such. "Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth?" Jesus asks. "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." In my family, the ratio is more like four against one.

But that's the nature of the gospel. Like fire itself, which can be the harbinger both of death and survival, purity and destruction, the gospel is powerful. It brings the good news of redemption, but it also causes division, even among family members, as we seek to understand and to appropriate its radical demands of unconditional love.

Jesus calls us to recover the fiery gospel, to reject the temptation to tame or domesticate the gospel into something less powerful and less transformative than it really is. Good news is radical. It changes everything. It reorients our thinking. It keeps us from being self-righteous because it acknowledges our shared humanity and calls us to serve others.

A fiery gospel, a gospel that redeems and also divides, that comforts us in our suffering and emboldens us to care for others. Jesus calls us to remember the radical, transformative power of the gospel, to recover the fire.

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Christ Church
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