

Sunday Sermon August 17, 2024

Challenging words from Jesus in today's Gospel... He says: "I came to bring fire to the earth." He says that He came not for peace but rather division. He speaks of households being divided: father against son, mother against daughter.

Challenging words. We might be more comfortable with Jesus the Prince of Peace, gentle shepherd, the one who gathers the children in his arms and brings comfort to those who are suffering. But fire?

There is no question that Jesus challenged the powers of this world, and that he paid the price for it. Every cross is a reminder of that. The earthly powers of that time, especially the Roman Empire, were threatened by the Kingdom that Christ came to establish: the kingdom of justice, love and peace. The kingdom where the inherent dignity of every human being was honored and respected by virtue of the fact that we are created in the image and likeness of God and loved unconditionally. That truth threatened the established order.

The Kingdom of God was and is a stark contrast to the Kingdom of man, and those who benefit from an earthly kingdom that places some on top and the rest down below are threatened by the new order that God's kingdom ushers in. The mighty cast down from their thrones, the lowly lifted up. The first last and the last first.

And so people of faith – people who keep their focus fixed on God, people who always keep God at the front and center – they are going to be in conflict with those who put their trust in man and in the ways of this world.

God offers us a vision of what our lives, and what human life can be. God's vision keeps God and God's ways at the absolute center and calls us to tell the truth, to live not just for ourselves but also for others, to seek holiness of life, and a passionate concern for the outcast, the oppressed and the poor.

God's vision for us and for our world informs how we steward the blessings that God bestows on us and how we treat each and every person that we meet, especially the stranger and those who are difficult to love.

Faith in God isn't just about what we think but about how we live, and especially how we treat the people the world is quick to label and cast aside.

And because they often challenge how our world – how the kingdom of man – operates, people of faith are ridiculed, even persecuted. You might have been struck by today's passage from the letter to the Hebrews, where the treatment of some of our ancestors in the faith was described in graphic terms: torture, mocking, flogging, stoned to death, sawn in two...

They paid the price for their faith, for keeping God at the center and opposing earthly powers that sought to oppress, discriminate and dehumanize.

In the early church, when Luke's Gospel was being written, followers of Jesus were being persecuted and killed for their faith. Standing with Christ, following his Way of Love, threatened the people with earthly power, and they thought they could rid the world of these pesky Christians. It was in the midst of all that that they remembered Jesus making it clear that His way was costly and would lead to conflict and division.

Karl Barth puts it this way:

"It is inherent in the nature of the Gospel to provoke division and controversy. The Christian message does stir up trouble. It thrives on it. To defend the poor provokes the anger of the rich; to defend the outcast enrages the in-group; to support a fair wage irritates the robber-barons; to call for peace incites others to war. We think we are safe because we have blunted the sharp edge of the sword of the Gospel. We think we are safe because we are silent. Wrong! Jesus is calling now for a division of the house. The only safe place for the Christian in this life is in the center of the storm, in the midst of the battle, for that is precisely where Jesus is."

The center of the storm. The midst of the battle.

It's not very likely that you or I will face serious persecution or death for our faith in Jesus, but I believe we are called upon to bring some of Jesus' fire to our practice of the faith and our living out of the Gospel.

It might happen when someone, even a family member or friend, starts in on some group – on migrants or Muslims or kids or some minority group – whoever. We know that what they are saying is not true, that it degrades and dehumanizes people, and that it can cause others to adopt their view.

We have a choice: remain quiet and let those perceptions grow, or calmly and respectfully point out that all “those people” the person is disparaging are not as that person views them, and then share a story of someone in that group who is kind, compassionate, intelligent, and good.

That could light a brush fire and escalate tensions, but it challenges unfair and demeaning stereotypes, which is exactly what Jesus did and what he would do.

For He is with us, in the center of the storm, as God has always been with those who sought to love and serve God, to live as God wants us to live, to love one another as Jesus did.

May we always keep our eyes fixed on God as we make our way in this world willing to light the fires that need to be lit.

Let us pray –

Gracious God, makes us signs of contradiction in our world:

May we be the fire of justice and righteousness, may we be immersed

In the waters of sacrifice and selflessness.

As we stand for the sake of what is true, right and just,

May we remember that you stand with us. If we find ourselves isolated

And ridiculed, may we find strength and hope in the example of your life and the promise of the life to come. In Jesus name, we pray...

Amen

(Jay Cormier)