I always cringe a bit when I see this passage from Luke come up in the lectionary and hope that it’s someone else’s turn to preach. “I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled!” Didn’t we just hear Jesus a few weeks ago rebuke a couple of the disciples for suggesting they command fire to consume a Samarian village? And now Jesus is talking about bringing fire to the earth?

And then one of the hardest things for us to hear, “Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division!” Well if that’s true, then Jesus should be really happy with the world today! It seems like a contradiction to so much else that Jesus says.

In the beginning of Luke’s gospel, the angels sang at Jesus’ birth, “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!” And, at the end of Luke, when Jesus appears to the disciples after his death and resurrection, he greets them with, “Peace be with you.”

Peace, peace, peace. Luke’s gospel is bookended with a message of peace and forgiveness and reconciliation. This bit about fire and division simply doesn’t belong. Perhaps we should rip it out!

It reminds me of a scene in the movie, Dead Poet’s Society, where Robin Williams plays John Keating, an English teacher new to a boy’s prep school.
On the first day of school, Mr. Keating asks one of the students to read aloud from the introduction to their poetry book. The student reads the description of how to graph a poem in order to determine whether it is excellent or not. As soon as the student finishes reading, Mr. Keating startles the class by declaring the introduction to be excrement and demanding they rip out those pages. After the students show reluctance, their teacher assures them that it’s not the Bible and that they won’t go to hell for ripping these pages out of their poetry book. Then the boys tear out the offending material with glee.

John Keating wouldn’t be the only one to take such drastic action against a piece of writing he didn’t like. Thomas Jefferson also favored removing undesirable text, and he didn’t have a problem with ripping pages out of the actual Bible. He took a razor to the gospels, picked the parts he thought were important, and glued them together in his own version. He left out anything supernatural or miraculous and anything about Jesus’ divinity. Basically, it was a collection of the moral sayings of Jesus and left much of the story out, anything Jefferson didn’t like or found challenging.

Maybe we should try it - wouldn’t it be great, to take out all the pesky parts of the Bible, and then we’d understand everything in it. If I were removing bits that I found difficult, I might snip out a bit of today’s passage. I mean, since it doesn’t fit the whole message of peace and all.

Except we don’t get to do that. I mean we could, but if we cut out all the challenging parts, then we miss so much. If we cut out the parts we don’t like, then we’ll only be hearing messages we want to hear, and Jesus didn’t only preach messages his listeners wanted to hear.
If we don’t consider all of it, then we don’t get to wrestle with hard things or dig deep to answer questions that confront us or continue to grow in relationship with God.

Why did Jesus say he came to bring division? Because that’s what he brought. His very life and death divided people into groups of those who believed in him and those who didn’t. Jesus never promised lack of conflict. Often it seems like he provoked it. He didn’t promise an easy road. Those who followed him while he walked on this earth did not lead contented, peaceful lives. They left behind family and friends, they ran afoul of the authorities, they were persecuted, beaten, jailed. Some of them even died excruciating deaths. As they proclaimed a message of good news, a message of peace and reconciliation, that very message was resisted.

When Jesus said these words, he was on his way to Jerusalem. He knew what was coming, and he didn’t turn away, surrendering to death to redeem even those responsible for that death. Though he himself chose the way of peace, not fighting against those who would kill him, he knew that his teachings, his life, and his death would upend the world. Even when we think we want peace, we often choose the way of violence. Even when the spirit of human beings is willing, our flesh is often weak. Even when we try to respond in love, we still often fail. He knew that his example of self-giving love would bring change not welcomed by all.

In the words of commentator David Ewart, “All change - even Good News change - will cause conflict and grief for the simple reason that all change - even Good News change - means giving up / losing something, and it means valuing one thing over another.”
Jesus welcomed the kindling of fire and the division it would cause because it meant change was coming. A message of peace, forgiveness, and healing would not be welcomed by all – hence, he was bringing division.

Perhaps, instead of asking why Jesus said he came to bring division, we might ask ourselves why we resist his offer of peace.

Jesus brought fire to the earth in the form of division, but it is not a fire that consumes us. Jesus’ fire is a cleansing fire, one that burns away the undergrowth of sin and hatred and creates space for new life to emerge, filling our hearts with a love big enough to embrace our divisions, big enough to hold our differences in tension, and big enough to bring us all together to the table.

That’s the kind of fire we can all pray might be kindled!