

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.

After last week's lesson, where we heard Jesus telling people not to be afraid, today's gospel can come as a kind of a shock. I think most of us don't want to hear Jesus saying that he hasn't come to bring peace, but rather division. After all, isn't peace on earth what is supposed to result from Jesus's birth? Certainly the Jewish expectation of the Messiah was that he would be a powerful military leader who would conquer their enemies, and bring about world peace. Well, he is bringing peace, but first he's bringing about God's kingdom, which we remember is radically different from society's expectations. Jesus is *describing* what will happen as people actually follow him, not *requiring* these things to happen. Let's take a closer look at one of Jesus's most challenging sayings.

First of all, Jesus says "I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled!" As 21st century people we don't have the same familiarity with fire as people in Jesus's time did. They cooked with it, they used it for heat, and they lit their homes with it. For these uses alone, they would have seen fire all day long, every day. There are some nods in the congregation—even though most of us don't experience this, we know that it used to be the case. However, there is another use for fire that Jesus's listeners also would have been familiar with, that might not occur to us: fire and the making of metal objects. In that process, fire is used to heat metals in order to refine them—to purify them. Even today, the best way to refine large quantities of gold, for instance, is to melt it at high heat, and skim the dross, or the impurities out of it.

This metaphor of a purifying fire is one way to look at what Jesus is talking about here. Using that metaphor, we see that the dross of sin could be burned away, leaving the penitent person

purified. Or, those who accept Jesus as the son of God will survive the refining fire, while those who reject him won't. In either example, the faithful will be able to withstand the coming cataclysm, while the unrepentant, the hypocrites, will not.

Then Jesus talks about his baptism, and how he is under great stress until it's completed. We know that he was baptized by his cousin John the Baptist, but now he's talking about the purifying "baptism" of his crucifixion and death. This passage shows his determination to continue on to Jerusalem and submit himself to this ultimate sacrifice for our sakes.

When Jesus describes what is likely to happen in families as a result of his ministry, that might have struck his hearers the hardest. For a society that functions on the basis of family, and counts kinship ties as their major identifiers, this news would have been seen as the destruction of civilization. But that's what Jesus is bringing: God does not see us in terms of our earthly family ties, but as God's children. If we follow Jesus, we need to reject the conventional values of our society, and focus on what Jesus is teaching: love, forgiveness, inclusion of all people. In doing that we will often find that our nearest and dearest don't approve. We might, indeed, find that we have "father against son...mother against daughter." Jesus is not saying it must be that way, only that it could be, because in embracing God's ways we necessarily reject some other ways.

Then Jesus wants his hearers to know that the signs of this coming upheaval have been all around them to see for a long time. He says people know when bad weather is coming, so how is it that they can't see the signs of the coming cataclysm? How can they not see that, in defiance of their own Law and prophets, the poor are not cared for, people do not seek peace, and there is little justice in their society?

Even in looking carefully at this passage, and understanding more of what Jesus is saying, we're not going to be entirely comforted. That's because Jesus hasn't come to validate our societal values, or tell us that what we're doing is okay. However, what he **does** tell us, repeatedly, is that if we repent—that is, if we stop doing the wrong thing, feel remorse, ask for forgiveness, and then *change our behavior*—we will be **forgiven**. But that forgiveness presupposes this *repentance*. Some people might say, “well, it doesn't really matter what you do, because you can always ask Jesus for forgiveness.” But in this passage Jesus is saying that's not how it works. He requires more of us than that. We need to actually be sorry, and then refocus so that we can really follow Jesus.

In doing ministry, I've often come across people who have what I'll call a “Church wound.” At some point in their life, the church, or someone in the church, has done or said something that has harmed or condemned them. Especially for people who have been wounded by the Church, passages like this can be hard to hear. But what can sometimes help all of us is to hold these hard sayings in tension with the sayings about love and forgiveness. This is not an either-or situation, but a both-and situation; Jesus said all of them. If we *can* carry both Jesus's hard, and comforting words we'll find that we can be galvanized by the hard ones, and uplifted by the ones that comfort.

Amen.

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