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Luke 12:49-56
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Prince of Peace?

"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?"

The beginning of Luke's gospel proclaims that Jesus will, "guide our feet into the way of peace." At the end of the gospel, resurrected Jesus stands before the disciples and said, "Peace be with you." Luke's gospel is bookended with these messages of peace. If you are one of those readers who starts a book and get through a few chapters and then loses interest but skips ahead to see how it ends, well then Jesus seems like a peaceful dude.

But if you read this middle section of Luke then the Prince of Peace is nowhere to be found. We find him in this part of Luke's Gospel kicking up dust as a rabble rouser. "I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled!...Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, division." Prince of peace? We might think of different monikers for the Jesus we meet here.

Jesus says he was coming to bring fire. The Refiner's fire is an image used in scripture is meant to burn away the bad and allow only the good to remain. Even cleansing type of fire is painful. One thing we must understand is that Jesus at this point in Luke's Gospel is mentally already shifting towards the journey he must make to Jerusalem. He is already starting to talk about his impending death. Jesus knows that he does not have long to live, and so we can excuse his sense of urgency. But in this lesson, it isn't just urgency, it is anger or frustration at least that people do not also feel that urgency. Jesus is fed up with people clinging to their false idols while he is about to sacrifice his life for those same shortsighted people. So, he gets a bit 'yelly'.

This passage is not exactly clear about what he means, and yet on the other hand, considering the rest of his ministry, it is pretty clear what he means. Jesus is reminding them that he did not enter the world because all was well. He wanted change, he wanted reformation, he wanted to burn things down. He needed people to start paying attention.

Thomas Aquinas said there are four main idols, four things that humans place as substitutes for God – money, power, pleasure, and fame. These are the kinds of things Jesus wanted to destroy. Jesus came to burn away everything which keeps us from God and everything which keeps us

from each other. We must remember the larger agenda of Jesus in the Gospel's to understand what he is upset about in this passage. Jesus was about compassion, Jesus was about mercy, and Jesus was about justice. He was about lifting people who were low. He was about reaching people who were outside. He was about helping people find their way. Status quo was not good enough for Jesus. The world was broken and messy and sinful and he came to disrupt those things for our sakes.

I went out to dinner this week and was seated next to two couples. I was waiting there for my husband, and I had nothing to do but eavesdrop. To be fair, they were loud talkers. They were talking about their children's private Christian schools and how the chapel services were almost absent from any Christian teachings. I kind of liked that. Then they started talking about the church they went to and how they really liked the pastor, but they did not like the music. I was the fly on the wall here. I wanted to reach across and tell them about our church and our great music program. That is until they pivoted to their next topic of choice. They began, in unbelievable ways complaining about their au pairs and their nannies. One of the couples had an au pair and a nanny, the other just a nanny. One of them complained that her au pair kept mispronouncing her husband's name. She said pretending to speak to this au pair and I quote, "How about you just focus on loading the dishwasher exactly how I taught you." They went on to nit-pick and degrade the people who care for their children and clean their homes.

Having just read Luke 12 several times in the week, I really, really wanted to quote some bible at them. I'm sorry but you can't do that; you can't complain about there not being enough Christian education at your children's schools and then in the very next breath be awful to other people. It just doesn't work. *'Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division!'*

There is a funny sticker of Jesus, the old-school traditional icon of Jesus and he's peaking around a corner and above him it says, "Saw that." I think I should just carry a stack of those stickers around with me and hand it to people who are out of line. Abuse God's creation – saw that. Mistreating the poor – saw that. Lying, betraying, stealing, oppressing, abusing, belittling – saw that, saw that, saw that. If only we all had a little Christian shock collar around our necks, buzzing us when we stepped out of line. Racism – zap. Homophobia – zap. Sexism – zap. I don't know what your particular 'ism or idol might be, but this stuff seriously does not please God.

Now there is good amount of hypocrisy in all of us, so we are not standing here with a perfectionist model in mind – Jesus came for the sinners absolutely but not to just let us carry on being obnoxious and self-serving and idolatrous. "I did not come to bring peace but fire to the earth." There are things within us that need to be burned off. That goes for individual people and for institutions. The agenda of Jesus causes division because we love our idols, and we are not going to be quick to give them up. But when we truly turn hearts and minds and souls towards God, we have got give stuff up.

And when we do give things up and make changes to how we act or speak or think it can make other people uncomfortable. If the other women, or one of the men at that dinner party spoke up and said, "As Christians, we probably should change the subject so we don't go down a bad path of just saying mean things about people." A soft redirection – how do you think that would go? I

bet you the tension at the table would rise and I bet the friendship would be fractured. If we change our ways or ask others to change their ways, for our faith, it can cause deep divisions. This is what Jesus knew – reformation caused division. And Jesus was okay with that because he was not there to bring peace but change for the sake of God’s kingdom. We need to be willing to be changed by God’s presence in our lives. We need to be willing to let God burn away the parts of ourselves that do not align with Christian thinking and living. When we let God in, we must let that stuff go.

C.S. Lewis described his own conversion to Christianity late in life as being “surprised by God.” And that surprise was not an altogether pleasurable experience to be called as a disciple. Why did he say that? He had to give up some of his old ways of being and some of his old ways of thinking. God did want to surprise us by calling us into lives of so much more. Your little lives can be so much more. More than the lives where we needed to grasp for power, or money, or pleasure, or fame to find our worth. In the new world, God provided the worth. Meaning came from God. Purpose came from God. Life came from God. We could finally stop being so little, stop being so afraid and start living full and meaningful lives.

Sadly, contemporary Christianity often asks Jesus to be too small. Focusing on just the ‘gentle Jesus loves the sinner’ side of the coin. But Jesus was as much harsh critic as he was prince of peace. We need to allow this other side of Jesus emerge, the stern teacher and the reformer. Because our God is not just a God of peace but also of truth. Jesus preached the truth and told people to give up their idols. Jesus preached the truth and told people to change their ways. Jesus came to teach us the truth and show us the way and give us the life. We need to work within our own hearts to let in the refining fire to make room for the light.

Amen.