

Text: Luke 12:49-56

Oh my goodness- what is Jesus talking about in our passage from Luke today? What can he possibly mean when he says, "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!"

What Jesus? Isn't Jesus the Prince of Peace? Didn't Jesus say, "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives." (John 14:27)? Didn't Jesus tell us to love our enemies, to turn the other cheek, and not to repay evil with evil? Didn't Jesus pray for all of us to be "one as the Father and I are one"? If so, then how can Jesus say he came to bring fire and division, not peace? Here he sounds more like Daenerys Targaryen from Game of Thrones than the peaceful Jesus we know from the Gospels.

I'd unpack this text because it so frequently misunderstood, misapplied, and misquoted. So, first, what is this fire Jesus speaks of? Obviously, Jesus wasn't talking about or interested in the power of literal fire. This word in the Greek is "pur" -it comes from the Sanskrit which means "to purify." Think of the way that fire is to purify precious metals like gold. Gold can only be made pure by being plunged into the hottest center of a fire -that "blue" section of the flame. And while it is there, all the impurities- everything that isn't gold, is burned and melted away - leaving only pure gold, a gold that can be molded into exactly the shape the goldsmith makes it. The end result is beautiful, pure, and exquisite. But the impurities had to be taken away, burned out - divided from the pure gold.

Jesus goes on to say, "I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what stress I am under until it is completed!" The baptism Jesus is referring to is, much like the process of gold being refined fire, a baptism of suffering. Jesus knows the only way to bring a true, deep, abiding peace at the deepest spiritual level is going to be accomplished through his suffering and death.

As Ephesians tells us: "For in his own person (Jesus) killed the hostility by restoring peace through the cross (Eph. 2:15-16). Thus, you who were once far off have been brought near through the shedding of Christ's

blood (Eph. 2:13) so as to create out of the two [deadly enemies] a single new humanity in himself, thereby making peace (Eph. 2:15). There's that peace again.

This passage is juxtaposing the peace of the world with the peace of God. And Jesus did not come to bring the peace that the world brings...that is a false and temporary peace gained by and through power and force, not self-sacrifice and suffering.

When Jesus says, "Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division!" Think of the peace he is referring to as the "peace" we observe in an unhealthy system, group, community or even country- a peace that is brought and maintained through power- the power of a few or even just one person. In an unhealthy family system where one member of the family has deep seated problem- they may be an addict or abusive or mentally ill in some way- but in that system a semblance of peace can only be maintained as long as everyone centers themselves around the problem individual. No one rocks the boat, no one points out the problem behaviors- the elephant in the room, no one complains, and then there will be a certain level of peace, and that problem-individual won't blow up or act out, at least temporarily. That person holds the power in that system. But that peace is not true peace, and people will largely live in fear in that system. At a larger level- we humans can maintain a peace, at least awhile, through power over large populations of people - because people will be fearful enough of the repercussions if they don't obey. This is a temporary peace certainly, but it is not the peace of God, nor is it the peace Jesus is seeking for us. In fact, Jesus will disrupt false and temporary forms of peace and create division in order to bring about a more abiding and true peace, the peace of God. But no significant change, no major shift in a culture, situation, family, country or even an individual can come about without creating some level of serious disruption, chaos and division... initially.

I'm going to really simplify this and apply what Jesus is talking to about to a major disaster: my hall closet. My hall closet is notoriously and frustratingly in the habit of getting jam packed, disorganized, dirty, and over full to the point of spilling over, far too often. My hall closet is often a source of fear: I know the holiday decorations are back in there somewhere, but in order to get to them it's going to cost me-it's going to cost me a lot of

time and effort...and I dread it. But when it gets bad enough, I will finally clean it. Actually, I'm proud to say at this very moment, my hall closet is totally organized- it was one of summer vacation projects that I completed, so this doesn't apply right now. But the process of cleaning out my messy hall closet involves making an even bigger mess, initially, than is currently there. I want order and unity, I want a peaceful closet, shall we say, but to have that, I have to pull everything out, spread all over the floor, down the hall, into the next room, and work my way through piece by piece, box by box. For a while the mess of organizing that hall closet far outweighs the original mess in the closet. But out of chaos and division comes order, unity, and yes, peace – and peace of mind. In time, the mess gets organized and things get put back in proper, better places than they were before. Trash is thrown away, the bottom is vacuumed out, things are re-boxed with like items, and eventually I have a hall closet that I can actually use. I can find what I want and need. And it's wonderful! Well, for like a few months anyway.

Now apply this same concept to something much bigger and more complex- like the changing of an entire culture out of its unhealthy patterns and habits. When Martin Luther King Jr. began to combat racism in America, part of his calling as a Christian pastor, was the goal of equality, unity, and ultimately peace, but we know historically that the initial stages of that needed change were anything but calm, peaceful, and harmonious. In fact, once the false peace was disturbed, division and upset surfaced dramatically. The false peace had been upheld by things like the Jim Crow laws, in which whites and blacks were segregated. And of course, the false peace reigns whenever one powerful person or group maintains the peace by oppressing and silencing another group. We know that MLK Jr. and the Civil Rights Movement upset that "peace." And in some ways, we are still experiencing the effects of this – it's only been a few decades and we are still sorting it all out. This movement towards peace and unity revealed the divisions between us. But the ultimate goal was always to move out of a false peace in order to bring true peace. Division is necessary, temporarily, in order for an authentic unity and peace to surface...to get us to a better place. And we can't give up the goal.

Jesus was and never has been interested in maintaining the status quo, in upholding a false peace that oppresses others in order to appease those who benefit

from it. But Jesus is not a warrior king or conqueror. He doesn't ride in on a horse, or a dragon, with an army to defeat others through physical might, power, and force. Jesus is not a Daenerys Targaryen. His throne is antithetical to the throne of humanity - this is no iron throne, this is the throne of a wooden cross- in which God's Son was literally broken and killed for the sake of love in his baptism of suffering.

So yes, Jesus came to bring fire to the earth – the purifying fire of God's call to purify our hearts and lives to become the beautiful, precious, pure gold we were created to be...with hearts that love God and neighbor as ourselves. Jesus came to bring division in order to destroy the false peace that reigns by force and oppression, in order to give us peace, not as the world gives, but as God gives. Because when we are at peace with God, we will be at peace one with each other.

Jesus calls us to interpret the present time- and see that false peace is not the way forward- God's peace, achieved through self-giving love, must be our goal as individuals, families, communities, and nations. We can't and shouldn't settle for anything less. The peace of the Lord be with you. Amen.