

PENTECOST PROPER 15 C 2010
St. Ann's Old Lyme

"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, 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." Luke 12: 49-53.

Nothing like a little light summertime reading.

In the Apostle John's account of the Resurrection, Mary Magdalene arrives at the tomb early Sunday morning and discovers that the stone has been rolled away and that Jesus's body is no longer there. She begins to weep. Then, hoping against hope that her eyes have deceived her, she peers into the tomb once again. This time she sees two angels dressed in white, sitting where Jesus's body had been. "Woman, why are you weeping?" they ask. She responds, "They have taken away my Lord and I don't know where they have laid him."

I felt much the same way this week when I began wrestling with this morning's Gospel lesson. "Someone has taken away my Jesus and I don't know where they have laid him." Who is this *imposter* who speaks of bringing fire to the earth, and of pitting mother against daughter, father against son? Whatever happened to the Prince of Peace? To the lamb of God? To the Jesus who preached reconciliation everywhere he went? "Someone has taken away my Lord ... and replaced him with this really weird guy."

If only it were that simple. The truth is that we are not victims of a body snatching. The sweet Jesus and the cranky Jesus are one and the same. That means that we have to embrace this passage with the same openness of mind and heart that we bring to "ye who is without sin cast the first stone," or "thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself." Yes, Jesus *is* cranky. It is a known fact that when you start calling your followers "hypocrites" you are probably not at your pastoral best. But Jesus has good reason to be on edge. By this point in the story, he has "set his face like flint" toward Jerusalem. He is trying to get his mind around the agony that awaits him there, and is consumed with what he must do and endure in order to fulfill his destiny. So let's overlook the stridency of his tone, and focus in on the content of his message.

Which, unfortunately, is not exactly clear. What, for example, does Jesus mean when he says “I am coming to bring fire to the earth?” To be honest, I’m not sure. But I do know what Jesus *doesn’t* mean. Even though this passage has a mildly Apocalyptic feel to it, it is not about the destruction of the world, so it is not *that* kind of fire. Perhaps Jesus has in mind a *refiner’s* fire such as that used to purify gold. He can’t wait to be about the business of purifying us, which is to say doing all that he can so that we will become our best selves. Or maybe fire refers to the passion that Jesus seeks to enkindle in us, a passion for justice and righteousness and mercy. Either that or the Passion with a capital “P,” the awful ordeal that awaits him in Jerusalem.

Whatever Jesus means by “I came to bring fire to the earth,” that is not the most difficult part of this morning’s lesson for me. Rather it is the following. Jesus says, “do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, [not peace] but ... division!” “Not peace but division!” What? How can this be?

Well for one thing, peace and discord, reconciliation and division, are not necessarily mutually exclusive. In fact, peace sometimes brings with it discord and division. Consider, for example, the story of the Prodigal Son. You know how it goes. A father has two sons. The youngest is a wild child. As soon as he is of age, he begs his father to give him his share of the estate so that he can be off to explore the world. The father is heartbroken, but he grants his son’s request. The young man then leaves the farm for the big city where in short order he manages to blow his entire inheritance on wine, women and song. One morning, he wakes up in a pigsty, and hears himself asking one of his porcine neighbors, “Are you going to eat that corn cob?” He realizes that he has hit rock bottom, and that his father’s servants are better off than he is. And so he decides to return home in disgrace. He knows better than to think that he can reclaim his former place at his father’s table, but he is hopeful that his father will at least employ him as a field hand.

As you know, the father welcomes the prodigal son with open arms, and throws a huge banquet in honor of his return. It is a lovely story of family reconciliation. Except for one thing. The reconciliation between the father and the profligate younger son leads to estrangement between father and the dutiful older son. The

older brother clearly resents the attention lavished upon his younger brother, but his pain runs much deeper than that. Perhaps the father's embrace of his good-for-nothing brother taps into memories of how their father used to coddle him, wink at his reckless behavior, and take his side in disputes. Perhaps the solid and stolid elder brother always felt overshadowed by his flashy sibling, overshadowed and, what's worse, disrespected. All this is just surmise on my part, but whatever the back story, it is clear that the father's loving and generous act of reconciliation toward one son produces deep estrangement from the other.

Fortunately, this needn't be the end of the story. It needn't end in division because reconciliation can become infectious. The mending and transforming of one relationship can lead to the mending and transforming of another, and another, and another. Imagine what might happen if the younger brother, chastened by his experiences and transformed by the generosity of his father, begins to see his older brother as someone to look up to, someone to admire. Imagine a father, no longer weighed down by grief and worry, who is now available to his eldest son in a whole new way.

I can wish for such an end to the story. But this doesn't negate the fact that at least in the short run, peace and reconciliation sometimes lead to discord and division. And the same is true of *change*, especially the head-spinning radical change that Jesus practiced and preached. "Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, I have come to turn the earth upside down. Do not be caught unawares. My efforts will occasion great turmoil, even dividing families against themselves."

Notice that Jesus speaks of mothers being pitted against daughters, and fathers against sons. One generation being pitted against the next. Why? Because Jesus had no particular stake in the world as he found it. His focus was on the world as it should be. He was constantly upsetting the apple cart; challenging received wisdom and conventional understanding. He rarely sided with the powers that be, and often as not championed the weak and the despised. He longed to turn the world upside down. Those of us who have been around for awhile – the older generation – have largely made our peace with the "right-side-up" world. Often we have a stake in it, and have figured out how to make it work for us. At a

minimum, it has the comfort of familiarity. At least we know what to expect. In contrast, our children and grandchildren are less committed to the status quo. They are, on average, more open to new ways of seeing and doing; more willing to embrace change even with all its turmoil.

This generalization is, of course, much too broad. I know lots of Old Turks and young fogeys. Whatever our age, whatever our generation, the question Jesus poses in this morning Gospel lesson is this: are we willing to follow him no matter what? Are we willing to follow him even if it means unsettling our lives, occasionally feeling foolish, and imperiling relationships we hold dear? Are we willing to be uncomfortable for Christ?

Despite his seeming denial, Jesus did indeed come into the world to bring peace. It's just that, as this morning's Gospel lesson reminds us so vividly, the path to peace is not always very peaceful. Turmoil and strife are assured. But not to worry, we can handle it. We can handle whatever the world throws up at us, because Christ Jesus has provided for us richly. "My peace I leave with you, my own peace I give to you. ... Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid." What an amazing gift! I urge you to embrace it. Amen.

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