

Luke 12.49-56

the crisis of the world

August 14, 2016 the Nineteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time Year C

Roy W. Howard

There are some sayings of Jesus that are so bracing that you want to ignore them. Take this passage for example! If we didn't already have enough division among us, here comes Jesus announcing that he too will cause division by what he says and especially by what he does. Families will erupt against one another, leaders and their communities, too. What on earth is the Prince of Peace up too? And what about that image of fire cast upon the earth? We have to reckon with that, too.

••

Let's begin with fires. We are trained to put them out, not let them burn. And if you're in one, you know what to do: stop, drop and roll. You'll recall some years ago, a huge fire took over Yellowstone National Park. People who love the park wanted immediate action to stop the fires. But the Park made what was then a controversial decision to let the fires rage until everything in its path was burned down. Previously, the forest service had **managed** fires, controlling them as well as possible. Then they discovered that fire actually liberates the Lodge Pine tree seeds. Their growth is intricately interwoven with forest fires. **Fire is necessary for the forest to replenish itself.** This is now the policy of the National Park system.

When we visited Yellowstone a year after the fire, the remaining trees were scorched black and the ground nearly barren at first sight. It was not pretty. Then we looked closely. We could see beautiful flowers coming forth, then our eyes opened to the new forest that was coming into being in this barren place. ***In the end, it was the fire that liberated the forest that is now flourishing.*** Maybe this is one-way to understand Jesus' mission to cast fire upon the earth.

Luke says the Spirit rested upon the timid disciples as tongues of fire liberating them from fear to boldness in proclaiming the good news of God's salvation. They were **on fire**, the evidence of which was a community telling the good news, praying together, sharing with the poor and holding their goods in common.

Is this the fire Jesus came to cast on earth? The fire that liberates people from fear and anxiety, setting them on fire with the astonishing news that Jesus Christ has come to save us, transform us and set us free for service? Of course, fire also burns some things away; and they say in the south: that's not so pleasant. ***Is there anything that needs to be burned away in your life to replenish your spirit and allow you to flourish in the ways of God?***

Fire is also associated with baptism: a cleansing fire that purifies and liberates us for costly service. When our young people served among the homeless on Philadelphia a

week ago, they sacrificed what they might have done— summer fun, sports camps, and more of those things that help you “get ahead” because we all know how important that is. But no, they spent nearly a week sleeping on cots with strangers, serving the homeless poor, pulling weeds in a community garden and learning about Jesus.

Is this the baptismal fire that Jesus casts upon the earth: setting people free for service to God and necessarily dividing them from those who might settle for something more manageable? *Is Christianity lite **what Jesus comes to burn away?***

••

To make matters sharper, Jesus says he has come not to bring peace. At this point we want to say, Gee thanks, that’s helpful. Now please explain yourself! Didn’t you say you would leave your peace with us?

Certainly we want peace, because the alternative seems so much worse. But isn’t it true that the desire for peace – in our homes, in our lives, in our communities – can lead to something that looks like peace but isn’t peace at all. It’s may be the absence of conflict but underneath there is an earthquake waiting to erupt. What kind of peace is that?

The costs of false peace are huge and the burdens don’t fall equally on all. Is this the peace that Jesus refuses to bring?

The kind where polite dishonesty and the absence of disagreement pass for peace? Conflict is avoided like the plague. If disagreements arise, the subject is changed to safer subjects. It’s like a gathering of young parents who won’t acknowledge that someone’s child needs a diaper change. And, yes, conflict doesn’t go away when it’s avoided – it just goes underneath where it plays out in indirect, destructive ways.

•••

When I was a graduate student at the Institute of Peace Studies, our professor once said, ***what you need is more conflict.*** That is not the message we expected to hear.

He explained that the capacity of a community to handle conflict openly and with skill is a sign of health and maturity; the same for a family, church and, yes, a political order. Our professor argued that that a community that develops the skills to face ordinary small disagreements without disengaging, attacking, or walking away in a huff, is much better equipped to handle severe conflicts that strike at the core.

Most of us avoid conflict. Yet, it can be the very thing that brings issues into the open where truth abides and honest decisions are made, even painful choices that divide one another. A friend of mine describes what it is like to lose a friend over the current election cycle. “Because we are no longer friends,” she says, “doesn’t mean we are

enemies. It does mean that certain convictions about what is truthful, right and just are important to us and we can't simply ignore the difference for the sake of a friendship."

Likewise, Jesus refuses to bring a false peace: veneer that avoids the truth.

Back in the day, someone said, "you don't need a weatherman to know which way the wind blows." That seems a fair paraphrase of what Jesus says to the crowd.



Jesus is the living presence that creates the crisis in the world and in our lives. It is his summons to give our total allegiance to God's way that threatens us, and our way of life. The Good News is that following Jesus liberates us, like fire liberates a Lodge Pine forest. Our sins are forgiven. We are set free for joyful service.

Following Jesus in this world sets us on a path that stirs up conflict because important matters are at stake. Following his way means saying No to other ways.

The peace he brings is not the peace the world brings. It is the peace of Christ himself: the peace that overcomes the world and brings life abundant.

The Peace of Christ be with you.