

*Sermon*

*ECOHS*

*August 14, 2016*

Most of us have a favorite image of Jesus. A common one we find in nursery rooms and in stain glass windows is one of Jesus carrying a lamb. We had a version of this in our children's room when they were little. It showed Jesus holding a little lamb in his arms. In the picture, you could see the wound from the nail of the cross through the back of his hand. An image like that is so compelling because it reminds us of God's great, tender love for us expressed in the life and sacrifice of Jesus. That image is something we can rely on when things are rough.

That is why, when we hear a different portrayal of Jesus, it can shake us up. The image of Jesus turning over tables in the Temple can be disturbing. We manage our discomfort by thinking, "Well, that was about *those* people, back then, not us." The thought of Jesus doing something like that today—maybe flipping over the tables in a pay-day loan office-- might be too close to home. An image like that would disturb our assumptions about the world—and about Jesus.

Today's passage is one of those disturbing passage about Jesus. Jesus speaks of fire and division in a way that feels uncomfortable to most of us. It seems almost threatening, like Jesus is trying to tear apart something that we all value—family and security. When we hear a passage like this, the temptation is to turn the page and look back on those safer images of Jesus. This is especially true if we feel insecure already; or if we are having enough family troubles without Jesus upping the ante. Before we turn the page, though, I would like us to slow down and consider what these uncomfortable words might mean.

Fire is a powerful image in human history. Some scholars say that the ability to harness and use fire for cooking and warmth and light were one of the earliest developments in basic civilization. Imagine eating raw food, being cold over half of the year, and living in darkness half of our days. That sounds horrible to me!

Fire is so powerful and useful—yet it is also terrifying. If you have been near a house fire or a forest fire or even a bonfire that is raging too high, you get a sense of the terror that our primitive ancestors must have felt as they tried to control fire for good. No matter how sophisticated and independent we feel today, fire is still a raw, elemental part of our lives that can keep us humble before the fury of nature. Just think of our fellow citizens out west who are facing the devastation of their lives due to wild fires.

So when Jesus states, "I came to bring fire to earth" it gets our attention. What does that mean? We know earlier in Luke's Gospel some of his disciples wanted to call down fire from heaven to destroy a Samaritan village that had turned them away. In that story, Jesus

rebuked the disciples. So apparently Jesus' use of fire as an image for his purpose in coming to the earth is not about anger and revenge as his disciples displayed. It is something more.

Jesus gives three additional images that bring clarity to what this fire is—his baptism; divisions in families; and interpreting the present times. Let's consider how each of these expand and clarify the meaning of the fire that Jesus brought to earth.

The baptism that Jesus refers to in this passage is not the one Jesus received from John the Baptist, the one represented in our icon. Jesus is speaking in the future tense—it has not happened yet. Most biblical scholars say that Jesus used the term "baptism" here to refer to his coming Passion, his suffering and death.

Jesus came to earth to rescue us from the power of sin. To do that, Jesus first had to reveal how and where sin existed. For him in his day, that power of sin existed in religious, political, and military leaders who were willing to use deception and power to protect their interests. And it existed in the people as they participated in and sought protection from this system of power; or used violence to try to achieve their own power. Jesus' arrest, torture and death revealed that ugly truth. That is part of the illuminating fire that Jesus brought to earth.

The ugliness of that reality is bearable as long as we keep the focus on "those people" back then and what they did wrong to Jesus. But the fire that Jesus brought continues to burn and bring light and truth in our day. Jesus' Passion occurred once in history, but the reality of it continues today among all who suffer—and that list is long!

Some on the list are far away. Just read the news about Syria, South Sudan, Honduras, North Korea, and other distant lands devastated by violence today. Some are nearby—the violence done by some in our cities and the abuse of power by others whom we have entrusted with authority to act on our behalf. These are just some of the examples of the millions of people who suffer in so many different ways all around us and around the globe. Jesus' baptism, his Passion, was about his identification with those who suffer—and about God's love for them and our calling to love them, too.

That truth is a core part of what it means to be a Christian. It is a part that some of us neglect because it can just be too overwhelming. Or we are too busy. Or we have been taught a Christian faith that is too far removed from what really matters to Jesus. Whatever the reason, the fire that Jesus brought to earth is perpetually burning and bringing light, challenging us who would neglect God's truth and love.

The division that Jesus described is related to that. Now at one level, divisions in families are not new. It seems like Jesus has just attended some of our Thanksgiving dinners. People in families are divided over all sorts of things—politics, religion, sports, success, inheritance, and so forth. But Jesus is doing more than describing a human reality. Jesus is describing what the fire he brought will do to our families. We hope the fire will bring real peace and reconciliation

to families—and it can, based on mutual transformation. But Jesus’ fire will also bring contrast to light and an honest division based on what we come to value even above family.

This is about more than political debates that take place around a dining room table. The fire Jesus brings is about what matters in life, not words. If our family values do not include caring for the people who are suffering in the world—if our family values allow us to neglect or condemn people whom God loves—then the division that comes from the fire of Jesus brought is necessary. That division is not about verbal fights with neither side invested personally in the debate; it is about our faith in Christ transforming how we live our lives.

St. Francis famously abandoned his father’s business and his foppish lifestyle after his conversion to faith in Christ. Francis embraced personal poverty and kissed the wounds of lepers. He worked to rebuild the ruined churches of Italy. He was divided from his family not from arrogance but from a deeper commitment to live based on what God values in life.

Few of us will match the faith of Francis in our lives—but that does not mean that we can avoid the deeper issues that can cause divisions between us and our loved ones. There is a clear line that Jesus understood that some of us prefer to keep fuzzy. We may appeal to reason and good manners and proclaim, “Live and let live.” That is an understandable approach—if our own lives are good. Yet if this keeps us from seeking to understand our world and responding fully to what Jesus calls us to do, then we are seeking peace when division is needed.

Finally, Jesus talked about “how to interpret the present times.” Back in his day, just like today, there were problems. His fellow countrymen debated whether or not to cooperate with or resist the Romans. Should they “blow the system up” or work within it to improve it? Or just keep their heads down and live. Sound familiar?

Jesus challenged their ability to notice what really matters. For Jesus, what mattered is building a community governed by the love of God. That means practical care for people in need, maintaining relationships through forgiveness and grace, coming together to worship God so that we can learn and be empowered to live as God desires for us, and bearing witness to God’s love for the world. That’s it.

Today, when we hear people trying to distract us from those basic priorities—living in community demonstrated by practical care for those in need, forgiveness and grace in our personal and public relationships, and acknowledging and worshiping Almighty God—then those people are trying to get us to join them in misinterpreting the present time. Beware when leaders demonize groups of people or offer solutions that are unjust, unkind, and unwise.

Today if we are brave, we pray for Jesus’ fire to come to the earth. A fire of renewal and faith is our only hope for our lives to be transformed and for our public institutions to be challenged to be responsive, compassionate, and just. The fire Jesus brought is not about one religion or political party winning. His fire is about prioritizing what matters, overcoming our fears, and living by the light and warmth of God’s grace. Amen.