“***To Cast Fire***” by S. Finlan, at The First Church, Aug. 17, 2025

**Hebrews 12:1–2**

1Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, 2 looking to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising [RSV] its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.

**Luke 12:49–53**

49“I have come to cast fire upon the earth, and how I wish it were already ablaze! 50 I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what constraint I am under until it is completed! 51Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division! 52From now on five in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three; 53they 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.”

We have two very different scriptures, especially different in their tone and feel. I think the first passage is really about Jesus himself, while the second passage is mostly about the conflicting *responses* to Jesus that are going to occur, and thus constitutes a warning for disciples to be ready to face resistance.

Let’s look first at who Jesus is, according to this brief passage from Hebrews. Jesus is the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. These terms show that his human nature is really important. He is a “pioneer” because we are supposed to follow in the path that he carved out. And he is a “perfecter” because his example is meant to be followed. As we run the race of faith, we are to imitate Jesus, and follow in his pathway.

His next point is that Jesus despised the shame of the cross. He showed that he was superior to all the petty politicians who framed him. “Despising the shame” means he was superior to the shame they tried to project onto him. He was not in fact shamed, because he was above that level. This is shown by the fact that he is placed at God’s right hand. Thus, the Hebrews passage seems to anticipate the wording formulated at the 5th century Council of Chalcedon, that he was “fully human and fully divine.” If we leave out either half, we miss some important facts.

The gospel passage tells us about the tremendous impact of faith. Jesus warns his followers that their efforts to win believers will have only partial success, even within families. Therefore there will be daughter against mother, and father against son within particular families. Disciples have no control over the response to their teaching. This is not the only time that Jesus warns his disciples to be ready for serious conflict. The conflict seems to have been a bit more intense in those days than it is in ours, partly because a person’s beliefs could get him or her killed in those days, but usually not in *our* day, at least in our country. In our day, it seems to result in an uncomfortable feeling between people, but usually doesn’t result in a complete rupture of relationships. However, it *could* result in a rupture, and we have to be ready for that, too.

What is he talking about when he says he came to cast fire? It could refer to the way that fire purifies metals. More likely it means fiery and courageous faith, just such a faith as Jesus had. And *that* will result in division within families, because only some people will catch fire with the new message. There will be some people on fire with faith; some others who will choose to believe, but who will be less fiery; and then some who will resist the spiritual call altogether. Jesus wishes that the faithful would be on fire already.

He was certainly on fire with faith. He exhorted faith in his disciples with vivid stories, strong appeals, and ardent prayers (Luke 10:21). He also had intense sessions of solitary prayer and worship. He mourned over Jerusalem with great sadness (Luke 13:34). He defended his friends with strong emotions, saying “Mary has chosen the better part,” and, regarding another woman, “let her alone” (Luke 10:42; Mark 14:6). He railed at the Pharisees, saying “you load people with burdens hard to bear, and you yourselves do not lift a finger to ease them” (Luke 11:46). He was indignant that people were being burdened with rules by the Pharisees. He had tender compassion, but also a fiery sense of indignation.

Let’s go back to the remark in Hebrews that Jesus is “the pioneer and perfecter of our faith” (12:2). The word translated “pioneer” (*archēgos*) is, more literally, “originator.” So the faith that Jesus practiced is the origin of the faith that we can practice. Further, he perfected the life of faith, and so he is also called the “perfecter.” Again, this focuses on the human faith-life of Jesus, and asks us to follow in his way. We can’t be Jesus, but we can be authentically ourselves and choose to do God’s will in our lives.

Hebrews had already used “pioneer” back in chapter 2, to say that, in “bringing many children to glory,” Jesus is the “pioneer of their salvation” and he calls “them brothers and sisters” (2:10–11). Even as his “children share flesh and blood, he himself likewise shared the same things,” and “had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God” (Heb 2:14, 17).

Jesus had to become human in order to really practice mercy toward his human children. He walked a mile in our shoes. Partly it was so as to teach us and provide us with an example, but also it was partly for Jesus’ own education, so to speak. He had to really experience what it was like to be a human being. This was a necessary part of the Son’s perfecting.

The *living* of a human life was of crucial importance. As he told the Baptizer when he came to get baptized, “it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness” (Matt 3:15). He was getting baptized because all devout Jews were getting baptized, but not because he needed to repent of any sins. Hebrews says he “shared the same things,” as other humans, and that’s what he was doing getting baptized. *Living the life* was a requirement for Jesus’ full attainment of righteousness, of complete and sympathetic understanding of human beings. Suffering injustice and incomprehension was also, apparently, part of what he had to experience, since so many humans suffer injustice and the incomprehension of their peers.

Sophronia Scott tells the story of her son Tain’s first communion. He actually tasted wine and he recoiled from it. But he took to the faith and they continued going to church. One day, in his third grade class, a gunman broke into his classroom and started shooting. He killed 26 people that day at Sandy Hook Elementary School, including Tain’s god-brother Ben. Sophronia says that she cannot describe the grief that washed over everyone, “an ocean of tears.” One night she asked Tain how he was feeling about Ben. She didn’t know if it was the right time to ask, but she did anyway. Tain looked at her with wide eyes and said “Mama, I just have the feeling that I’m going to see Ben again. He’s going to be with all of us.” Sophronia said “yes, I think you’re right.” She writes that faith is like buoyancy, keeping you from drowning in grief. God goes with us through everything, and she is grateful that her son Tain learned that. (time.com/5056834/secular-faith-sandy-hook/)

Jesus, the pioneer of our faith and the great example of spiritual living, showed us how to love, to live, to give thanks, to discern truth in the prophets, and to have hope for the future. He is our brother in the faith, but also our divine creator. Most importantly, he is bringing many children to glory.