

**Preacher:** Pastor Twyla

**Scripture:** Luke 12:49-56

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

*He also said to the crowds, "When you see a cloud rising in the west, you immediately say, 'It is going to rain,' and so it happens. <sup>55</sup> And when you see the south wind blowing, you say, 'There will be scorching heat,' and it happens." <sup>56</sup> You hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present time?*

There was a fiery old revival preacher named Peter Cartwright, who was famous for telling it like it is. He was preaching near Washington D.C., and the people of the church heard that President Andrew Jackson was coming to visit them.

So, they pulled Cartwright aside and said: "Listen Peter, the President is going to be here on Sunday and we know that sometimes you can get kind of offensive, so would you tone it down.

We don't want to upset the President."

So, Peter got up in the pulpit the next Sunday, and his first three sentences were these:

"I understand that the President of the United States, Andrew Jackson, is with us this morning.

I have been asked to be guarded in my remarks. (Pause)

Andrew Jackson will go to Hell if he doesn't repent."

The church was appalled, but when worship was over, President Jackson grabbed Cartwright's hand, shook it, and said, "Sir, if I had an army of men like you, I could whip the world."

Like Preacher Cartwright, Jesus spoke words of truth in the opening verse of today's scripture lesson that may make us uncomfortable. It doesn't matter which bible translation you read the text from, his words sound tough. "I have come to cast fire upon the earth," (NRSV), "This is serious business we're involved in. My mission is to send a purging fire on the earth!" (The Voice translation), "I came to set the earth on fire" (Good News), "I am come to send fire on the earth," (KJV), all of these translations send a message to wake us up to the fact that God sent Jesus to earth to take care of some serious business. He wasn't messing around, he says, so pay attention.

In Jewish thought, fire is almost always the symbol of judgment. Jesus here, regards his coming, the coming of his kingdom, as a time of judgment. William Barclay writes, The Jews firmly believed that God would judge other nations by one standard and themselves by another; that the very fact that a man was a Jew would be enough to absolve him." We know this is not true. Just the same, just because one calls him or herself a Christian, and is that only by name, does not mean he/she will escape God's judgement. His words to some sound so very harsh, maybe even unbelievable, because it just doesn't sound like the Jesus, they want to know.

Today's scripture is one of the most challenging for some Christians to understand. It only makes sense then that those who are not Christians and those who are new to the faith find it to be a stumbling point in their acceptance of Jesus.

We are drawn to other scriptures that tell us that Jesus is the Prince of Peace, which is more comforting to us. We sing hymns that reinforce this image of Jesus. One of Charles Wesley's well-known hymns begins with, "Gentle Jesus, meek and mild, look upon a little child," It's confusing and perhaps troubling, then, to us when we hear the words that Jesus spoke in today's text and compare it to the words he spoke in John 14:27, "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid." How then can it be that Jesus is both the giver of peace and the

cause for division, as Jesus says in today's text, perhaps even causing division in our most cherished relationships such as family?

Prior to today's scripture reading, we find Jesus talking about his return and judgement. He spoke words of warning to be ready for his return. He said that a kingdom was being prepared for his followers. This sets us up to understand that it is not the person Jesus who brings division into our relationships with others, it is his call on our lives and our acceptance of that call. The call of Christ overrides any other loyalty, any other commitment, and any other relationship. The call of Christ overrides logic. The joy of relationship with Christ overrides any fear. There is no greater joy than what is found in a relationship with Jesus Christ.

Jesus is just being honest with us; he is just telling the truth—that following him wasn't meant to be easy or comfortable. It is a reality that one of the difficulties of following Jesus is that it could strain or even end relationships as we have known them with some very special people in our lives. Yet, we must put Christ first and at the very center of our lives, above all things, above our own comfort and above all other people, while continuing to love those who disagree with us. To say that Jesus Christ is our Lord and Savior is to say that our modern-day idols—whatever form they may take—are not the rulers or saviors of our lives!

Alexander Mack, who is given credit to be the founding father of the Church of the Brethren experienced division in his own family as he followed the call Christ put on his life. The church and state were in cahoots with each other. Baptism became a mechanism of control for the state. The church agreed to baptize infants, not only as a sign of sign of God's grace, a mark of new birth and an initiation into the Christian community; but as a tool for the state to use for tax purposes.

Also, as the Brethren studied the scriptures on their own, which was looked down upon by the church, they interpreted the scriptures directed baptism as a symbol of a personal decision to follow Jesus. O they began rebaptizing the adults among their numbers and continued then to baptize only adults. This got them into a lot of trouble with the state and the church.

Back to how this affected Mack. His father disowned him due to the existing political and social pressures during the early 1700s. His father was relatively wealthy and involved in politics, which influenced his decision to disinherit Mack. Additionally, as a respected member in his community and church, the religious and social dynamics of the time played a role in the disinheritance. Alexander Mack faced scrutiny from his community. Mack's family decided to follow the leanings of these pressures and the family became divided.

The divisive element in Jesus' call reminds us that Jesus did not come so that we could have a perfectly happy life without any struggles-- *though the peace of God contributes to us finding true happiness in our lives*. It reminds us that Jesus did not come with a guarantee that we would always get along with our siblings or other family members-- *though the peace of God may help us live with the conflict that may arise, and given the opportunity, one day release us from our own feelings of resentment and pride so as to be free to make the first move toward reconciliation*. It reminds us that Jesus did not come so that we could get along with our coworkers and neighbors, *though the peace of God may help us stay afloat during disputes*.

As Jesus spoke these words, he was very aware of what was on the horizon of his own life. In verse 50, he speaks of a baptism (NRSV) he must face, and he wishes it was over. He actually was speaking of the horrors of the crucifixion he would need to endure. He would be submersed in dark waters of hatred and ignorance. This was to be his journey, it was why God sent him to earth. And as he hung on the cross and awaited death to arrive, he would endure unimaginable spiritual pain caused by complete separation from God, because he would be bearing the sin of the world, humanity's rejection, disobedience, and unfaithfulness to God.

Jesus, like others who followed him, would be a victim of the divisiveness he brought to the world. People wanting him to be who he was not, and do what he did not come to do therefore, rejecting him; vs. Jesus followers, embracing with trust and obedience and love, the Savior of their souls. At first it looks like the side that revels in the divisiveness won the battle over the One who proclaimed to be the living heart of God among them, the loving and peaceful heart of God. But we know that those against Jesus did not win in the end. Jesus rose from the dead, sent the Holy Spirit, and now lives on to proclaim the truth through us.

So, the peace of God has to mean something other than the absence of pain, struggle and conflict, something other than what we can acquire because we have the desire or need to live a comfortable existence. The Bible teaches us that the peace of God is something like a magnetic center of calm for the person who is committed to Christ, who is drawn into the storms of turmoil and divisiveness. The peace of God is an anchor that keeps us from being swept away in the storms of life. Frederick Buechner says that "for Jesus, peace seems to have meant not the absence of struggle, but the presence of love."

Faith testimonies we hear about people taking extreme measures for the cause of Christ, may tempt us into thinking that the call to discipleship only comes to the select few under extreme conditions. But Jesus calls each one of us every day. We make decisions every day whether to follow or not to follow Jesus, in how we spend our money and our time, who we will show love and serve vs. those who we will ignore, and how we relate to all people around us, including those who have chosen to dismiss us, even though the division that can occur in relationships and other challenges that might arise because we are faithful can be out of our control and painful.

Jesus is the Prince of Peace, and the good news of even this difficult passage in Luke's Gospel is that Jesus came to set humanity on the right path again, and that the call of Christ creates a community that has something more important binding it together than just a family tree and shared genes.

Jesus came to start a fire, the fire of God's love and God's peace, and we are called to help fan the flames and set this world ablaze, above anything else we could do and above anything else that is important to us.

The evidence of the times, right now, reveals desperation and lostness, we hear the cries for help to escape suffering and injustice that the fallen values of the world inflict on humanity, **and** at the same time we know the saving grace and promise of the Gospel. Jesus, in verses 54-57, speaking to a predominately agricultural producing society uses an illustration about the ability of being able to interpret the natural signs signaling the types of upcoming weather, rain or sun, requiring a response to adequately care for crops.

Only a foolish farmer would ignore the signs and ignore caring for his crops as best he could. Likewise, self-proclaimed Christians see the evidence of a fallen world, they see also the signs of God's kingdom being built right before their eyes, yet they may intentionally ignore making a true commitment to Christ and the continuing work to build that kingdom. Jesus wants us to know, this is not the time to water-down the gospel; it's never a good time to intentionally ignore an opportunity to be love, Christ's love, to another in need; it's insanity to live a hypocritical lifestyle to the gospel we proclaim.

It doesn't matter that some will call us fools and reject us, what does matter is that others will be enlightened to the truth. The pain we may experience from those who turn their backs on us and ridicule us, will be nothing compared to the separation we would experience from God when we intentionally choose a path diverting our attention and love from Him and His will. Nothing will be more rewarding than to hear from our Almighty Creator say to us, well done my faithful servant, come into my kingdom. On the other hand, God's judgement and rejection would be a pain beyond our human comprehension. Let's fan the flames of faith with Jesus, no matter the cost. Amen.