

Proper 15 - 12 Pentecost – Year C – August 15, 2010
Isaiah 5:1-7; Psalm 80:1-2, 8-18; Hebrews 11:29-12:2; Luke 12:49-56
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“Double, double, toil and trouble,” chant the three witches as they stand around a steaming cauldron in the famous scene from Act 4 of Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*, or for the thespians amongst us, the Scottish play. Fire and water figure prominently in today’s Gospel reading, and not in the kind of way that we associate with Jesus’ calm, confident and compassionate care. In fact, if we take Luke’s words at face value, we seem to see a whole new side of Jesus pouring out vitriolic rhetoric and contempt upon anyone who is listening. Promises of fire and eagerness to get it kindled. Division and strife within families. No peace on earth. And the final stinging rebuke of being called a bunch of hypocrites. Most of us would rather not have to listen to this portion of Luke’s Gospel, with the portrayal of this critical and outspoken Jesus, who sounds like He’s losing it. Many of us would just as soon skip this bit and find the parts where Jesus is speaking about God’s love and blessings, or sharing the gift of healing.

If you feel like your own life is like a boiling vat of toil and trouble at present, then this is a good passage to read and study. If you feel like your life is going along just fine right now, and you’re filled with peace and gratitude for God’s blessings, then it is also a good time to study this passage. For all of us, it is good to know that Jesus is still the Jesus we know and love, but it is also good to know that Jesus never waivers in His commitment to God and His mission here on earth. In turn, that gives us confidence that what Jesus accomplished through His work on the cross and in the resurrection was a gift of incomparable love.

In the context of this passage, Jesus is on His way to Jerusalem and the cross. There are two types of fire in Scripture. There is the fire that literally burns up and destroys; and then there is the fire that purifies, cleanses and even heals. The Holy Spirit falls into the latter category. She guides each of us into right relationship with God and with our neighbors. In this instance, the fire that Jesus brings to earth is also part of our cleansing, through release from sinfulness and forgiveness, and the gift of eternal life, which is release from the bondage of death. The fire that Jesus brings to earth is the fire that He intends to take on Himself in the baptism of His suffering, death and resurrection in Jerusalem. Jesus gives of Himself completely and in great love so that the whole of creation might be reconciled to God through Him.

We have all had conversations with family members, friends and neighbors that ended up leaving us feeling upset or angry, even unwilling to speak to that person for some time. Most of those conversations were about issues on which we could not see eye to eye. If our deepest held values are at stake, then our emotional involvement is also high. And we all know what happens when emotions run high and unchecked. We can even get to the point where we simply can’t hear anything anyone else has to say. Breaking points can occur at any stage in a relationship when there is a disagreement, but most often when it touches on something that we hold dear to our hearts. Religious beliefs are high up on that list. We also have to know a little bit about first century family structures in order to see where Jesus is going with His prophecy of division. The first century household was patriarchal in nature and the fundamental building block of society. The continuation of a family name, inheritance of property, and money were all firmly tied to bonds of kinship. We get a glimpse of Jesus’ views on blood ties when He is asked about His family in Luke chapter 8:21, and He says “My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it.” The example Jesus gives in today’s Gospel reading includes inter-generational division, and includes divisions between men and women. In effect, Jesus’ presence and mission changes the most basic of human constructs and power structures.

So what is Jesus saying here? That the angels that announced His birth to the shepherds were lying when they spoke of the incarnate Word as the coming of God’s peace on earth? Does Jesus bring peace on earth or not? Yes, indeed Jesus does bring God’s peace. However, God’s peace is not wrought by sustaining human values that do not align with God’s will. Nor does God support unjust systems and human-made

power structures that allow a small group of people to keep getting richer at the expense of the poor. God's values are equality, justice and mercy for all. The kingdom of God is present when the Body of Christ is fulfilling the call to mission, and working tirelessly to break down walls of oppression and towers of injustice. Jesus' mission causes division at all levels of society between those who wish to maintain the status quo – usually the rich and powerful – and those who desire that God's will be done. Mary, the mother of Jesus, prophesied a similar reversal where the poor would be raised up and the rich brought low. Simeon's prophetic words are also true in Jesus, as the one "destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed" (Luke 2:34-35). The divine peace promised to the world at Jesus' birth involves the establishment of right relationships between each of us and God. The peace that passes all understanding is a living and active force in the world when we share God's love and compassion with others, and seek God's justice on earth in all the ways available to us. For example, we can lobby our elected representatives to support the Millennium Development Goals and end extreme hunger and poverty in the two-thirds world. We can establish another slice of equality when we use our purchasing power to preferentially buy fair trade goods, and avoid products made in countries that we know abuse their workers. We make a difference in the fight for justice when we give generously from God's abundant gifts and blessings to the poor and marginalized.

For those who heard Jesus' words, they should have known that everything He was saying was already available to them. In fact, the leaders and teachers of Israel should have taught it to them. As God's chosen children, and a light to the nations, they are charged with the responsibility to seek out, understand and implement God's will. The Law and the prophets shout and scream God's insistence on justice and righteousness as fundamental to God's economy. Those who reject Jesus and His teachings, reject God's will, just as they neglected the weightier matters of the Law, and killed the prophets. Nothing has changed in this respect. You and I still have the responsibility to grow in Christ and continue Christ's mission to this divided world full of toil and trouble. When you and I fail to study God's Word, neglect to offer ourselves to God in Christ's service, and put a low priority on spending time in prayer to discern God's will, we are standing still in determined ignorance. Similarly, if we choose to silence a prophetic voice that convicts our hearts or our actions by distancing ourselves from God's community, we are also resisting God's desire for us to grow and mature into Christ-likeness. Alone, we risk becoming a dying ember, rather than a burning torch lighting the way to Christ with fiery passion, and the same single-minded determination that Christ models for us.

Jesus rebukes those who can forecast the weather and predict rain or scorching heat based on the wind direction, calling them hypocrites. We think of the modern definition of a hypocrite as one who says one thing and does the opposite. In this case, Jesus is talking about those who should know the sign that is Jesus Christ, God incarnate, but have become determinedly ignorant of what His presence and teaching means as a fulfillment of the Law and the prophets. By rejecting Jesus, they are turning a blind eye to God's purpose in and through Jesus' life and ministry, and a deaf ear to God's Word made flesh, including all that Jesus teaches about God's will for the world. It *is* hypocritical to feign ignorance, when all we need to know to recognize Jesus as the Son of God is available to us.

When it comes to making changes in our own lives that are not altogether comfortable, but are in full accord with Jesus' agenda of compassion, mercy and justice for all, do we say "Thy will be done" or not? The good news is that God has blessed each of us with the knowledge and power to bring more of God's peace into reality, and to share that peace with all the troubled and weary people that God leads into our lives. As Graham Kendrick's hymn says, "Shine, Jesus shine, fill this land with the Father's glory; blaze, Spirit, blaze, set our hearts on fire. Flow, river, flow, flood the nations with love and mercy; send forth your Word, Lord, and let there be light!" (*With One Voice*, 651)

Amen.