



Mount Carmel Lutheran Church

Peace, Division, and True Community

by Director of Faith Formation Nick Ralston on Luke 12:49-56

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In this section of Luke Jesus is talking to His disciples and the crowds

Verse 49 reads, “I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it was already kindled!”

Biblical scholars and commentaries are in common agreement that the fire Jesus is referring to here is not a fire of wrath or judgement as we are prone to think.

That reality should cause us pause though. It should rouse all of us to ask the question, “Why when we read about fire anywhere in the Bible do we immediately think of destruction, fire, and brimstone.” That isn’t inherent, of course—that is learned behavior, an idea that has been “taught” through 1000s of years of misleading theology that aims to paint a caricature of God as a wrathful, vengeance filled, cosmic tyrant. It desperately needs to be undone.

No, this is the *refining* fire of the Holy Spirit. It’s the spreading of the Kingdom of God like a wildfire within us and within the world. In Luke 3:16 John proclaims that Jesus will baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire! Later in Acts, a book also written by Luke, the author depicts a fire coming upon the disciples at Pentecost and—again—this is not a fire of judgement, but the Holy Spirit!

Now it makes SENSE that Jesus would exclaim, oh how I wish it was already kindled!” Then Jesus goes on to ask a rhetorical and seemingly odd question to the disciples. He says, “Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division!”

These verses, and this whole passage for today, actually, serve as a prime, really Grade A example of the harm that can be done by reading scripture passages in isolation and removing them from their context and the over-arching narrative of the Gospel of Christ. It is only through those bad practices that one can read this passage at face value and conclude that the Prince of Peace actually isn’t in the business of peace and wants to divide families and dismantle community. But we know that that’s not true. Jesus is the Prince of Peace and immediately forms and invites all of us to join in community as well. God embodies true mutual indwelling within Godself even! And as far as divisions, societal, religious, socio-economic, national, or otherwise, Jesus came to obliterate them in His name.

So what does this mean? What is Christ discussing here?

The catch is this. Jesus didn't come to bring FAKE community. And Christ's Kingdom is not one of *partial* peace for some. The vision of the Kingdom here on earth is to be "as it is in heaven!" Nothing less than perfect love that casts out all fear...true peace and community.

So what is it, within the discussion of division and peace, that Jesus is interacting with?

A commentator from one of Pastor John's resources on Luke writes:

"Jesus warned that those who make a commitment to Him [and His way] will be persecuted, that a commitment of faith also means that our attitude toward material possessions must change,...that moral responsibilities must be taken with even greater seriousness, and that we cannot make a commitment to Christ without it affecting the way we relate to those closest to us, friends and even family" (NIB)

This is why Jesus goes on to say that none of one's other commitments, familial or societal structures, or other pursuits should ever supersede this call to build the Kingdom of Heaven on earth and attend to these "moral responsibilities with even greater seriousness". And let me be blunt, because here Jesus is: if you have people, entities, even family members, powers structures, rulers, or nations that aren't on board with that vision—there's going to be some division, there's going to be some conflict. And there has to be, because the way of Jesus can never concede itself to the way of the world or else he wouldn't be the Christ.

He turns to the crowds now and tells them, "When you see a cloud rising in the west, you immediately say, 'It's going to rain'; and so it happens. And when you see the south wind blowing, you say, 'there will be a scorching heat'; and it happens. 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?"

That same commentator asks, "To what do we pay close attention and to what do we turn a blind eye?" And to put it into context of who Jesus is speaking to, for a first century Palestinian farmer paying attention to the weather is paramount. It's no less integral to the advancement of one's self interest, security, and economic expansion and sustainably then, than comparable current practices are to today...maybe more.

Friends, this division is happening within the Church both in America and globally today. I read articles and social media posts about it every week. And this division continues because, just as Christ's way could never concede to the ways and the powers of the world, true right relationship could never concede to abuse, real community could

never concede to fake community where all aren't included, real care for others could never concede to bigotry, and the true Peace Christ is talking about could never concede to a broken system that provides 'peace' for the privileged by terrorizing, harming, killing, excluding, caging, or brutalizing others.

Jesus knows this. That's why he warns His disciples in our passage and says If you start following me, and you start treating people the way I would, if you change your perspective to focus on my call, and if you soften your heart to love like I do—yeah, there's going to be some conflict, there's going to be division. But you're going to be far too fulfilled by lasting matters of the kingdom to worry about the weather anymore.

But as Jesus warns it's going to cost you something, maybe relationships, definitely your standing within powerful groups of society. And was he lying? In verse 50 Christ talks about it, "what stress I am under" he exclaims, until His work during His time on earth was completed. And where does he end up down the road? Hanging on a cross. Abandoned. Peter denies him. All the followers, the crowds, they almost all fell away. There's a saying "It's lonely at the top." But you know what I think? I think it's lonely at the bottom also.

See when you love too freely, when you include too widely, when you break down too many barriers, when you piss off too many powerful entities. The crowds, definitely the powers, and the paparazzi leave. And what's left is just you and your convictions.

This church, the ELCA, knows about division. It knows about conflict. And just two weeks ago, in another bold step of faith at the annual meeting, the ELCA became the country's first ever "Sanctuary Denomination."

"The measure, approved during a church-wide assembly in Milwaukee, pledges that in addition to providing shelter for undocumented immigrants, the ELCA could:

- Respond to raids, deportations, and the criminalization of immigrants and refugees
- Fight individual cases of deportation, press for the end of mass detentions, and lift up immigrants' voices
- And take prophetic action to extend radical hospitality to immigrants and immigrant communities" (CNN)

And when you take a stand like this on your convictions to this day, just like Christ, there's still blowback, there's still division. A certain news outlet, after this story broke, put out a hit job segment on the ELCA. Many of you may have seen the clip. They had their 'experts', mega church pastors etc, on the show talking about how this wasn't *really* Christian. That the ELCA shouldn't really have clashed with this American nationalist Christian movement. That maybe the kingdom of God should concede a little bit to this world. That sure, Jesus is King of Kings, but when His call clashes too much with the nations, maybe we need to sell him out and follow other kings instead.

See these individuals, they're focusing on the weather. Denominations do this all the time. Believe me, I've dealt with this from the past. "Well maybe we should just play the middle". The cloud coming in from the west becomes "Wait how many people will leave, what about the money?" The wind coming up from the south is "how much heat are we going to catch for this". "Let's just never take a stand, try to pacify all sides, and that won't cause any division".

This is the kind of division Jesus is talking about in Luke 12!

Thank God Jesus didn't play the middle. The only reason we're talking about this 2,000 years later is because Jesus took a stand. He looked the angry mob and religious officials dead in the eyes, people who held His life in their hands, and said "I tell you before Abraham was, I am". They were enraged. Jesus healed a man on the Sabbath, no hesitation.

He could've taken a more palatable approach. He could have said, "Healing today is going to ruffle too many feathers—I guess I won't". Can you imagine? We can't, because Christ's will is absolute.

Now, I told you that it was "lonely at the bottom", but something else happens at the bottom—a movement—with all the other people who are left out.

Let me read you some of the comments on the ELCA's Sanctuary post on Facebook:

"Now that's what Jesus would do", "WTH I'm Lutheran now", "thank you for caring", "I might go back to Church", "Love this. Would love to find a local ELCA congregation", "A Christ centered church that actually follows the teaching of their Lord? I shouldn't be so impressed, but I am. Thank you and blessings", "How can I donate to show support to those churches where need is greatest?" "I hope more follow their brave, noble, and Christ-like lead". ...And the list goes on & on.

Friends, having faith means keeping your eyes fixed on Christ and God's call in your life, using that as your guide and north star, trusting that even when the divisions, the unrest, the clouds, the wind, and the weather come, that love will find a way, that God's love and God's justice, steadfastness, and provision will be enough.

If we keep our eyes on that we can't go wrong. Amen.