

## PROPER 15, PENTECOST 10, AUGUST 14, 2022

“I came to cast fire upon the earth. How I wish that it was already ablaze.” With some of the heat waves and fires we’ve been having here, across our country and the world, it feels like fire has already been set. And if that’s not bad enough the Gospel reading for this morning only gets worse. Jesus then goes on to say: “Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, I have come instead to bring division.

This passage is disturbing and despised by most of us and we just want to say, really, Jesus. This is not the Jesus we are used to and probably not the Jesus we want. This is not what I wanted to hear. It’s hard, right now, to read this long, fiery sermon, and hear Jesus saying families and friends are being deeply divided. It’s hard because we are living it, now. We’re divided as a people. We are divided socially, racially, economically, politically, religiously not only in our own country but throughout the world. There is division in marriages and families, in the workplace, in our schools.

Our politics are nasty, even vulgar. We are ablaze with the heat of hate, of anger, of despair all around us. On social media, people bully and badger people with their “right” ideas and words become flames that ignite more divisions. We rage with accusations and insults, with par-boiled opinions and cherry-picked facts.

Yet, in this gritty sermon Jesus is putting everyone on notice that he is aware of politics that exclude, the hypocrisies that keep power to a chosen few, and the selfishness and the indifference that resides in all of our souls. This division that Jesus brings is about recognizing the reality that in order for us to be human we have to be humane. Think about that for a moment. In order for us to be human we have to be humane. He tells us that we will be divided in our convictions and our opinions because he knows how hard headed and hard hearted we can be to our fellow human beings – even family members. He knows that if we truly follow him and his work of love, forgiveness, compassion and inclusivity we will be divided because of the difference in convictions and opinions of how we treat each other.

Jesus reminds us that division will always occur when we put ourselves and our own interests first and do despicable things to our fellow humans. The Bible is filled with stories about this darker side of ourselves. Think of the stories about Cain killing his brother Abel, Jacob stealing the birthright from his brother Esau, Joseph’s eleven brothers selling him into slavery. And that’s just the book of Genesis. As the Hebrew Bible unfolds we read tales of consistent squabbling both within and between generations of people.

I am also reminded of times in our own history—the Trail of Tears, the Civil War, Jim Crow laws, when we have turned on each other with equal enmity and vitriol and it continues today. Jesus knows we are arrogant. We are stubborn. We jabber on and on about humility but act with pride. In the heat of the day and in the heat of anger, we create “the other” and then blame them. We completely agree with Jesus about loving the neighbor, unless the neighbor doesn’t agree with us. When we consistently look for others to blame, when we ignore the humanity of every person then we create more and more divisions.

His words are a necessary reminder that the peace Jesus offers us is not the fake peace of denial, dishonesty, and harmful accommodation. His is a holistic, truth-telling, disinfecting peace. The kind of deep, life-changing peace that doesn’t hesitate to break the way we’ve always operated or done things. Jesus will name realities we don’t want

named. He will upset hierarchies we'd rather keep intact. He will expose the lies we tell ourselves out of fear, inflexibility and selfishness. And he will disrupt all dynamics in our relationships with ourselves and with each other that keep us from wholeness and holiness.

The basic, basic radical truth that Jesus told the people is that we are all children of God and beloved by God. God is there for everyone of us and what divides us is our inability to recognize that we are equal and God treats us equally. God doesn't care what our skin color is, what our gender is, what our nationality is, what our beliefs are, what our sexuality is, how much money we have – only we care about those things. Jesus calls us to a new way of life, a new peace, a new relationship, a new rule of God in our hearts. This new life demands an end to the old - old loyalties, old ways of behavior, old attitudes, in fact, everything that does not fit with the command of putting God and the needs of others before ourselves. We are called to battle against greed and selfishness, against cruelty and oppression, against injustice and indifference, wherever they may be found.

When we stand up for those beliefs and embrace the inclusivity of God, yes division will occur even in families. And this is the great scandal of our faith, that the Prince of Peace who came to give us a new understanding of God and one another, who spoke of God's promise of wholeness, healing, reconciliation and forgiveness should become the cause of so many divisions because of our inability to recognize that equality and belief in Jesus message is central, not politics, not any one individual, not love of country but God's message.

Jesus knew his message of love would bring about division but he also knew it was the same love that would win out, that it could cool the heat and soothe the anger if we only had the guts to truly understand and live out his message.

We are responsible for our fellow humans. Our own well-being is intimately tied to the well-being of our siblings, our neighbors, and even our enemies. We diminish our very own humanity when we do not act as each other's "keepers."

Nelson Mandela understood this. At the end of his autobiography, *Long Walk to Freedom*, Mandela reflected on his life and said:

"Freedom is indivisible; the chains on any one of my people were the chains on all of them, the chains on all of my people were the chains on me. It was during those long and lonely years [in the struggle against apartheid and in the twenty-seven years I was imprisoned at Robben Island] that my hunger for the freedom of my own people became a hunger for the freedom of all people, white and black. I knew as well as I knew anything that the oppressor must be liberated just as surely as the oppressed ... I am not truly free if I am taking away someone else's freedom, just as surely as I am not free when my freedom is taken from me. The oppressed and the oppressor alike are robbed of their humanity ... For to be free is not merely to cast off one's chains, but to live in a way that respects and enhances the freedom of others."

Out of this conviction—that one's freedom is tied to everyone's freedom and that one's humanity is tied to everyone's humanity—Mandela forgave his political enemies and invited them to join him in building a new nation in which everyone is truly free because everyone lives in a way that "enhances the freedom of others."

Jesus' message is in fact, not about dividing families so much as letting the people around us know that the kind of peace we support is peace for all, not peace at the expense of others. Jesus tells us today to become radical disciples of the peace he

advocates for. We cannot just listen and observe and call ourselves Christians. We need to act now for the peace and love which exemplifies all that Jesus is and what God desires of us. The question is do we have the courage. Amen.