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Epiphany Lutheran Church, Castle Rock, Colorado
Proper 15 (Pentecost 10), Series C
Saturday, August 17th, 2019
Sunday, August 18th, 2019

Sermon: Baptism by Fire

Text: Luke 12:49-53

Focus: Jesus suffered God's wrath on the cross to save us from our sins.

Function: That they would believe and follow Jesus no matter what their family says or does to them.

Structure: Story-Framed

Locus: "I believe that Jesus Christ... has redeemed me, a lost and condemned person..." (SC, 2nd Article of Apostles' Creed).

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Savior, Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen. Many of Jesus' sayings have inspired, comforted, and given hope to billions of people through the centuries, including many non-believers such as Gandhi. "Blessed are the those who mourn, for they shall be comforted" (Matt. 6:4, ESV).¹ "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God" (Matt. 6:9). "Love your enemies..." (6:44a). "Judge not, that you be not judged" (7:1). "It is more blessed to give than to receive" (Acts 20:35). And "whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them..." (Matt. 7:12). "Fear not, little flock..." (Luke 12:32). I could go on and on with Jesus' sound advice and inspiration.

But much of what Jesus says in the gospels, rather than bringing comfort, causes confusion and consternation. Jesus is often brazen or even *abrasive* in the way that he speaks to people. Some of his hardest teachings are certainly not the kinds of pithy sayings or sweet sentiments that you would include in a greeting card.

Consider the following statements of judgment or rebuke: "Cast the worthless servant into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth" (Matt. 25:30).

¹ All Scripture references, unless otherwise indicated, are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version.

“Depart from me, you cursed...” (Matt. 25:41). “Woe to you..., hypocrites, for you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead people’s bones and all uncleanness” (Matt. 23:27). “You serpents, you brood of vipers, how are you to escape being sentenced to hell” (Matt. 23:28).

Or consider what Jesus says in today’s Gospel reading:

“I came to cast fire on the earth, and would that it were already kindled! ...Do you think that I have come to give peace on earth? No, I tell you, but rather division. For from now on in one house there will be five divided, three against two and two against three. 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” (Luke 12:49, 51-53).

How’s *that* for a Father’s Day or Mother’s Day card?

Does this passage mean that Jesus Christ, the Son of God and Prince of Peace, actually came to destroy peace and stir up division in families?! That doesn’t sound right. Doesn’t God *love* families? Doesn’t the Church support “family values”? What’s going on here?! With all this talk about turning families against one another, Jesus sounds more like a cult leader than the Savior of the world.

First, rest assured that Jesus loves families. God invented marriage, and Jesus went to weddings and funerals. He obeyed his parents and grew up with brothers and sisters. The only reason Christ himself never married is because his bride is the whole Church.

But family division is the inevitable impact of the Gospel. Some people in your family believe in Jesus; others don’t. And the tension between believers and unbelievers is unavoidable. If you don’t believe me, just ask a wife who goes to church without her husband—or parents whose children abandoned Christianity after going off to college. Some of the most difficult conversations families have (or avoid) are those surrounding religion. Especially now, when the cardinal virtue of our post-modern culture is “tolerance,” people pounce on you as soon as they

hear you oppose abortion or gay marriage because of your Christian beliefs. What are you, some kind of bigoted Neanderthal? You know *exactly* what I'm talking about... Remember that awkward argument at Thanksgiving dinner last year?

In some families the division quickly descends from debate into danger. In many Muslim countries, when a family member converts to Christianity, it brings great dishonor upon the family. So to restore honor, the father, brother, or husband of a new Christian must perform a so-called "honor killing" in order to restore family honor in the community. Every day in places like Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Sudan, men murder their wives, sisters, and daughters because they have traded the crescent for the cross.

Similar terror happens in Communist countries like China and North Korea, where parents and children may turn over their loved ones to the secret police if they discover they are Christians. They are more loyal to the Communist Party than they are to their own family members. They hand over their spouses, children, and parents to be tortured, imprisoned, or even executed, either because they fear retribution by the State or because they actually believe the insanity of Marxist ideology.

Every day around the world, Christians die for the name of Jesus because their families hate the Gospel. Fathers against sons, mothers against daughters, daughters-in-law against mothers-in-law. Division—just as Jesus said...

Christians are called to love Christ above all else. For if we do not love Jesus more than our country, family, political party, or the approval of men, then we are not really Christians. Instead we worship an idol, and we are not worthy to claim the name of Christ. "Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me" (Luke 14:26). Jesus first—or Jesus not at all.

This internal conflict is as old as the early Church. As William Barclay writes:

“Over and over again a man had to decide whether he loved better his kith and kin or Christ. The essence of Christianity is that loyalty to Christ has to take precedence over the dearest loyalties of this earth. A man must be prepared to count all things but loss for the excellence of Jesus Christ.”²

Here’s what it all boils down to: whom do you love more, Jesus or your family?

I know that we’d all like to be able to answer, “*Jesus!*” without reservation. But let’s explore that a little bit. When you spend every weekend going to youth sports tournaments instead of worship, you are choosing your family over Jesus. When you work seven days a week without taking Sabbath, you are choosing your family (or money) over Jesus. When you keep quiet about your Christian beliefs so that you don’t offend your in-laws or liberal siblings, you are choosing your family over Jesus. Whenever we turn away from Christ to sin, we choose something or someone instead of Jesus.

All of this makes Jesus’ mention of casting fire upon the earth even more horrifying (cf. Luke 12:49). We ourselves are in danger of hellfire if we do not turn from our sin and return to Christ. In the Bible, fire is usually a symbol of divine wrath and God’s anger over sin. “For the Lord your God is a consuming fire, a jealous God” (Deut. 4:24). “Fire goes before him and burns up his adversaries all around” (Ps. 97:3). So Jesus’ mention of fire causes many to believe he is speaking about the final Judgment on the Last Day, when all the wicked and unbelievers will be cast into the lake of fire prepared for the devil and his angels.

But then Jesus follows up that statement with a cryptic comment: “I have a baptism to be baptized with, and how great is my distress until it is accomplished” (Luke 12:50). What is this “baptism” Jesus speaks of? Clearly, it is not his baptism by John the Baptist in the Jordan River. That took place all the way back in Luke, chapter 3.

² William Barclay, *The Gospel of Luke*, rev. ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1975), 170.

So what is this baptism of fire? We get a hint in Mark 10 when James and John, the sons of Zebedee, ask Jesus to seat them at his right and left when he comes into his kingdom. They seek vainglory, but Jesus' path is the *via dolorosa*, the way of suffering and sorrow.

“Jesus said to them, ‘You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?’ And they said to him, ‘We are able.’ And Jesus said to them, ‘The cup that I drink you will drink, and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized, but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared’” (Mark 10:38-39).

You have to read between the lines a bit, but the baptism Jesus speaks of is his death on the cross. It was a hard drink to drain—truly a baptism by fire. For on the cross, God poured out upon Jesus all his anger against our sin. The fire of God's wrath fell on *Jesus* instead of us. He took the punishment for our sin so that we could belong to the Father forever. He went through fire and water for us—to hell and back again—to bring us to a place of abundance (cp. Ps. 66:12).

But Jesus warned his disciples they would suffer too. “The cup that I drink you will drink, and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized...” (Mark 10:39a). All of the apostles would die a martyr's death, with the exception of John, who spent out his final days on a prison island called Patmos. Every Christian follows Jesus in the way of sorrow, mockery, ridicule, and rejection. “If anyone would come after me,” Jesus says, “let him deny himself and take up his cross *daily* and follow me” (Luke 9:23). As Dietrich Bonhoeffer aptly points out, the Christian's cross is not suffering in general but suffering for the sake of *and because of the name of Jesus Christ*.

The shadow of the cross is like a line in the sand. Crossing that line separates you from everyone else in the world who doesn't believe. But it makes you part of a *new* family: Jesus Body, the Church. Though even your mother and father may forsake you, the Lord will take you

in (Ps. 27:10). For no matter what your family and friends think of you, no matter how much they spit on you or hate you because of your Christian faith, the Lord Jesus will always have a place for you. In fact, he goes to *prepare* a place for you, that where *he* is, there you may be also (John 14:2-3).

Our response to the Gospel may divide our families, three against two, and two against three (Luke 12:51). “But if God is for us, who can be against us?” (Rom. 8:31b). “The Lord is my helper; I will not fear; what can man do to me?” (Heb. 13:6). (*Aside: You might be able to put that in a greeting card!*) So “do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell” (Matt. 10:28).

Jesus came to cast fire upon the earth—and the fire fell on him. He was baptized with fire *for you*. And he would do it all again, if he had to, because of his great love for you. Thankfully, once was enough—“once for all” (Heb. 10:10). In the name of the Father and of the Son and of ✠ the Holy Spirit. Amen.