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Epiphany Lutheran Church, Castle Rock, Colorado
Proper 15, Series C
Saturday, August 13th, 2022
Sunday, August 14th, 2022

Sermon: Blood Is Thicker Than Water

Texts: Luke 12:49-53

Focus: Jesus Christ welcomes us even when our own families reject us.

Function: That they would follow Christ even at the cost of their family's rejection.

Structure: Verse-by-verse

Locus: "We pray in this petition, in summary, that our Father in heaven would..., when our last hour comes, give us a blessed end, and graciously take us from this valley of sorrow to Himself in heaven" (SC, 7th Petition of the Lord's Prayer).

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. Today's Gospel reading is one of the most troubling teachings of our Lord Jesus:

"I came to cast fire on the earth, and would that it were already kindled! I have a baptism to be baptized with, and how great is my distress until it is accomplished! 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 12:49-53, ESV).¹

Jesus' words today are hard to swallow. This doesn't sound like the nice, smiling, affirming Jesus that we want to believe in. This Jesus

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

comes to us with a hard word of truth and a warning of the terrible consequences that may befall those who follow Jesus. If you are only a *fan* of Jesus, and not a disciple, now is your chance to turn back. But there is a blessing for those who have ears to hear what Jesus has to say.

Jesus says that he comes to cast fire upon the earth (v. 49). Fire is a sign of God's judgment upon unrepentant sinners, the nations of the earth that resist God's kingdom, and the devil and his minions who attack and persecute Christ's Church. While Christ's first coming was to save the world, not to condemn it (John 3:16-17), nevertheless, Scripture teaches that when he returns on the Last Day, Jesus will separate the sheep from the goats, the wheat from the chaff, and judge the living and the dead. "For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil" (2 Cor. 5:10).

As fallen sinners, we tend to fear Judgment Day. But for forgiven sinners who believe that Christ died for them, Judgment Day is a day of great joy—a day to look forward to! For Judgment Day is the Day when the wicked will reap their just reward and finally get their due. In

Revelation, the saints under the altar in heaven ask, “O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?” (Rev. 6:10). No wonder, then, that Jesus says how he longs that the fire were already kindled. Just as we long for the world to be set to rights, so does Jesus. And someday that Day will come.

But fire has another aspect or quality in Scripture. Earlier in Luke’s Gospel, John the Baptist prophesied that the Messiah (Christ) would baptize us with the Holy Spirit—and with fire (Luke 3:16). For those who believe and belong to Christ, fire has a refining quality.

When ore is put into a smelting fire, the pure gold and silver melts away from the dirt and dross that would otherwise cling to it (cp. Rev. 3:18; Ps. 12:8). God’s Word is a purifying fire that exposes our sin and cleanses us with the fire of God’s Law and then restores us through the comforting Word of the Gospel. Fire is hot. It burns. It hurts. But it is good for us.

Jesus says that he has a baptism with which to be baptized (Luke 12:50). This is an oblique reference to Jesus’ death on the cross. When

James and John asked Jesus to be seated beside him in his coming kingdom, he asked if they could drink the cup he drinks and be baptized with his baptism, to which they foolishly declared, “We can” (Mark 10:38-39). The cup is a reference to Jesus’ suffering and death—a cup which he asked the Father in the Garden of Gethsemane to let it pass by him. Christ’s Baptism is spoken of in parallel to this same cup, indicating again his suffering and death on the cross. Jesus does not speak of water baptism in Luke 12. He underwent water Baptism in the Jordan River (Luke 3:21). That is one and done. But the bloody baptism of the cross still looms before him, for that was the only way he could save us from our sins.

That is why Jesus feels constrained until his Baptism is accomplished. Despite the pain and horror of the crucifixion, Jesus nevertheless longs to accomplish the purpose for which he came: our salvation. The author of Hebrews tells us that Jesus “scorned” or “spurned” the cross, “enduring it shame” because of “the joy set before him.” How could the cross be a source of joy for Jesus? Because of his great love for you. A marathon runner does not look forward to the pain

and exhaustion of the race, but he does look forward to the joy and satisfaction of finishing something few people on earth are able to. Nor does a mother look forward the pain of child birth, but she does look forward to the joy of welcoming a new baby into the world. Such is the joy of Jesus.

So far, so good. But then Jesus says something absolutely unutterable: “Do you think that I have come to give peace on earth? No, I tell you, but rather division” (v. 51). How in the world can Jesus say that he comes to bring *division* instead of peace? Isn’t he the Prince of Peace? Isn’t he the one who gives us the peace that passes understanding? Doesn’t Jesus pray for the unity of his Church in his High Priestly Prayer (John 17)? How, then, can he say that he comes to bring division.

First of all, yes, Jesus is the Prince of Peace, and he wants to bring peace to the whole world through the forgiveness of sins won for us on the cross. He wants to make wars cease, to break the bow and shatter the spear, to burn the chariots with fire, and to beat our swords into ploughshares. But not everybody else wants that. Most of the world

hates and rejects Jesus because of his exclusive claim to be the only way of salvation (more on that next week). And so because the world hates Jesus, the world hates the ones who love Jesus. Division is the inevitable result of the Gospel's proclamation. Like the separation of the sheep and the goats on the Last Day (Matthew 25), so also even in this life there exist those who love Jesus and those who hate him, those who love the Church and those who seek to destroy it, those who love Christians and those who mock, ridicule, abuse, and persecute them. There are those who believe and obey Jesus' Word, and those who reject it. Wherever the Word of Christ is preached, there will be division.

Tragically, this division touches close to home and separates even families. Quoting the prophet Micah, Jesus declares, "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 12:52-53; cp. Mic. 7:6). This prophecy is the most heartbreaking

part of today's Gospel lesson. Nobody wants to imagine this kind of conflict in their family.

And yet we all recognize that this kind of conflict already exists. Some of your relatives make fun of you or even attack you for supposedly being “bigoted” or “intolerant” because you actually have the audacity to believe what the Bible says. Other family members are uninterested in the Gospel and bored with Jesus. They don't go to public worship or pray before meals anymore. God just has no part in their life. And so, even though you've loved them your entire life, they are like strangers to you.

I have a pastor friend whose sister is a lesbian. He loves his sister, but their relationship is strained, and they can barely have a meaningful conversation about anything. My friend doesn't argue with her about her lifestyle or criticize her. He doesn't have to. She already resents him because of his vocation and confession of faith. By just *being in the same room*, his life bears witness to Christ and his Word. He cannot help but do otherwise. And she hates him for it.

In some places around the world, it is even worse. In countries like Iran and India, Muslim and Hindu families will kill their own children or siblings if they convert to Christianity. So-called “honor” killings are necessary to remove the shame of having a Christian in the family. So they murder their loved ones. In other places, such as China and North Korea, where Communist regimes suppress the Gospel, children betray their parents to the secret police. Brother betrays brother. Husbands hand over their wives to be jailed or killed for Jesus.

Not everyone in our families is a Christian. Not everyone we love believes in Jesus. Not everyone we love will be saved. The Gospel brings division now on earth and for eternity in heaven.

Jesus himself knew this all too well. He said that “a prophet is not without honor except in his hometown and in his own household” (Matt. 13:57). At various points in his life, Jesus’ mother scolded him or thought he was crazy. His own brothers did not believe in him until after he rose from the dead. In Luke 4, his neighbors became so infuriated by Jesus’ teaching that they tried to throw him off a cliff in order to kill him. Thankfully, they did not succeed.

Jesus never sugarcoats the truth. He never pretends it is easy to be a Christian. Being a disciple of Jesus is costly, and Jesus encourages us to count and weigh that cost before we decide to take up our cross and follow him (Luke 13:1-9). If you think being a Christian is all about getting rich or being happy all the time—having “your best life now”—then you will be disappointed.

Yet Jesus offers us what the world can never give us: the forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation. And even though he says the road will be hard, he also promises to go before us—and to go *with* us. He is with us always (Matt. 28:20). And even if our own mother or father should forsake us, the Lord will always take us in (Ps. 27:10). And even if our brothers and sisters or children should reject us because of our love for Jesus, in the Christian Church we receive an abundance of brothers and sisters, mothers and children—more than we count! And in the age to come... eternal life (Mark 10:30).

Jesus gives us abundant blessings—“grace upon grace” (John 1:16). And yet all these blessings come with suffering and persecution. Christianity is not a religion for the fair-weather faithful. Jesus is not a

Lord for those who want to take it easy and coast through life. God is not a Father for those who listen once to his Word and then turn away. Anyone who loves father or mother, husband or wife, daughter or son, more than Jesus is not worthy to be his disciple. They say that blood is thicker than water, but Jesus' blood is thickest of all because only *his* blood washes away our sins.

Jesus comes to cast fire upon the earth. He wields the sword of truth. He brings not peace, but division. And yet there is no life like the life he offers—the life he *purchased and won* for us by his blood shed on the cross. Christ *is* our life. Our life is hidden in Christ. He is “the way, the truth, and the life” (John 14:6). There is no other way to live but Jesus. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of ✠ the Holy Spirit. Amen.