

Fire on the Earth (Part Two)

I have come to bring fire on the earth

Reflection 29 in the series “The Last Great New Command”

But now let’s take this one step further, one step deeper. This fire that Jesus brings will even burn inside you. And, in fact, it has to, because if you wish to truly possess this kingdom of God, this kingdom of unending joy, you must be willing to let go of everything else. You must let go of every person, every thing, every outcome to which you are inordinately attached, every person, every thing, every outcome you have come to feel you cannot be happy without. They do not make you happy.

In fact, they are always the source of your unhappiness. What they do is keep you from seeing all the other people, all the other gifts God has already given you, all the other outcomes that would be way better than the one you’re locked in on. And now maybe you can stop moving from job to job, friend to friend, place to place, and find the peace you’ve always longed for.

But first Jesus’ fire must burn within you, purging you of the web of deceptive fantasy and illusions you cling to: the things you feel you must have, the approval you feel you can’t live without, the ambitions that are unworthy of you, the fears that keep you from kindness to the wretched of the earth, all the false dreams that distract you from the kingdom of God.

Sense the deep discontent still inside yourself, the restlessness still there after all your attachments. It’s a spark of disillusionment that if fanned into flame will burn up those things in your life that can never bring you joy. And that’s good. This fire is the crisis in your life, the turning point, the moment, the life-and-death moment in your life. Let this fire loose inside you, and you will find yourself living in a new world lit by resurrection and open to the Spirit of God, filled with joy and tranquility. You will finally be fearless and free, and you will have entered the kingdom of heaven.

Yes, it will cost you. This is not for the faint of heart. Back in Matthew 10, after Jesus had said that he had come not to bring peace but a sword, he went on to say, in verse 39, “Whoever find his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.” The Greek word translated “life” is translated variably “life” or “soul” or “self.” So whoever finds his self will lose it and whoever loses his self for my sake will find it.

Jesus is saying, “If you will be my disciple, if you will take on my mission of peace to a world filled with people who will hate you for it, you will have to get over yourself. Only by losing yourself will you find yourself. And to keep your wits about you when telling the truth and doing what is right will only bring down on yourself the hatred of many, including maybe some of those closest to you, you will definitely have to get over yourself.” And as part of that, you will have to give up even all expectation of peace.

Peace itself turns out to be a paradox. Do what makes for peace, but don’t expect peace. Expect the sword. Because only if you let go of the expectation of peace, the expectation

of an easy and comfortable life, can you do those things that make for peace. If you don't let go of this expectation of peace, of a conflict-free life, you will always vacillate and double-speak; you will quit speaking truth and you will begin to say only what people want to hear. You'll probably think too hard, and end up creating problems that weren't even there in the first place. You cannot and should not expect a conflict-free life. Not if you're following Jesus.

Back in the day I used to watch the TV show *Boston Public*. It was a show about life in a large inner-city public school in Boston. And one of the episodes I remember best centered on the departure of a long-time teacher named Harry Senate. Mr. Senate had the class of incorrigibles down in "the dungeon," and if he didn't always teach by the rules, he always cared intensely about his kids. But now he's burnt-out; he took one risk too many and this time he's too wounded. And so he walks out of the school one last time into the darkness of a wintry night, and in the parking lot he runs into a new teacher who's just started that day, Kimberly Woods. She's had a pretty challenging first day with these savvy inner-city students. But now she gushes over meeting Harry Senate. He is a legend at Boston Public. And she asks him, "Does it ever get any easier?" Senate's reply? "No, not if you do it right, but it's the best job in the world."

And I thought: That's it. That's what learning to live a life of love is about. That's what life in the kingdom of God is about. That's what Jesus is saying in texts like ours. Does it get any easier? No, not if you do it right. But it's the best life in the world.

But it takes getting over yourself. It takes getting past yourself. It takes getting past your own stuff. It takes going through the fire. It's letting all your other attachments burn up and entering into everything it takes to learn to live a life of love.

Sam Keen in his book *Fire in the Belly* (p. 157) – again this image of fire – observes that the final step toward maturity is self-forgetting. The mature person has been set free from agonizing self-consciousness, from worrying always how she looks to other people or whether she's impressing other people, and is free to explore and participate in the world beyond the self. Such a person is what Keen calls "spiritually available." Everyone else may be obsessed with money or power or reputation or health or whatever – or even their own "spiritual journey" – and they are not available to give themselves to others or to live vibrantly. The mature person, Keen says, is "animated by trust," and it is this that sets him free from agonizing self-consciousness.

And now such a person is finally strong enough to do the things that make for peace, to speak the truth and do what is right, though swords and fire flash all around him. Does it ever get any easier? No, not if you do it right! But it's the best life in the world.

We are called then to this kind of courage. It takes being animated by trust. It takes catching a glimpse of God's new day and knowing that a day of peace is coming. It takes getting over yourself, passing through the fire, and entering into the salvation of the world. And of course it takes new birth, starting over, becoming what you never

otherwise could have become, feeling the forgiveness of God, feeling it so intensely that you can now forgive others, and discovering within yourself the Spirit of God.

– Dale Pauls