

Fire on the Earth (Part One)

I have come to bring fire on the earth

Reflection 28 in the series “The Last Great New Command”

This essay – both parts – is excerpted from my last sermon in this series and the last sermon I preached here as senior minister. So it’s also the last essay in this bulletin series. The sermon was preached May 28th, 2017.

Jesus once said to his disciples, “I have come to bring fire on the earth.” But whatever might this possibly have to do with Jesus’s last great new command – that we are to love one another? What does it have to do with learning to live a life of love? It is an interesting passage (in Luke 12:49-53), the Prince of Peace saying:

“I have come to bring fire on the earth.

...

Do you think I came to bring peace on earth?

No, I tell you, but division.

From now on there will be five in one family

divided against each other

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 daughter-in-law

and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law.”

This point is made several times in the Gospels. Matthew (in 10:34-36) tells of Jesus warning his followers:

“Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth.

I did not come to bring peace, but a sword.

For I have come to turn

‘a man against his father,

a daughter against her mother,

a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law –

a man’s enemies will be

the members of his own household.’

You may recall what the old man Simeon said to Mary when he encountered her and Joseph and the baby Jesus in the temple (from Luke 2:34-35): “This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel ... so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too.” John the Baptist claimed that

Jesus would baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire (Luke 3:16). The gospel writer John described Jesus' imminent death this way (in John 12:31): "Now is the crisis of this world." Crisis here does not mean emergency, but the turning point, the defining moment, the life-and-death moment of this world.

And now he says, "I have come to bring fire on the earth." It's first part of a historical context. As Luke puts it in 9:51, "Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem." In this section of Luke Jesus has knowingly turned to face his death. And so he's preparing his followers in a very real way, "I have come to bring fire on the earth. Do you think I came to bring peace on earth? No, I tell you, but division."

My way, Jesus is saying, is not for the faint of heart. Before peace and harmony and all that stuff there comes conflict, sharp disagreement, division. Announcing God's kingdom, learning to live this life of love, does not bring peace – at least not immediately. If you commit yourself to Jesus, you better expect opposition, sometimes from your own family. Houses, families and generations will not agree on this. Those closest to you will not agree. Your father may not understand you. He may not approve of you. He may become very angry with you. My own father never understood the decision in this place for gender equality. My mother in one angry moment after he died said, "You know, you broke your father's heart."

But this is what Jesus is saying. You may set out to do what is good and moral and right, and those closest to you will hate it. And nothing is more emotionally devastating than this. So be prepared, Jesus says. This is not for the faint of heart. Insistence on love, insistence on justice, on peacemaking, on human rights, on fundamental human equality, on care for the poor and care for the planet, will enrage a lot of people. To talk of forgiveness and mercy and grace and trust will enrage a lot of people.

And Jesus is saying that he will be the first casualty, and of course he was. Challenging the status quo makes people mad. Challenging the ways things have always been done makes people mad. Challenging those in authority and positions of power makes people mad. Exposing pretensions and hypocrisy, and arrogance and complacency, and greed and selfishness makes people mad.

God's reign – this life of love and these communities of faith where we learn to live a life of love – challenges everyone who supposes that the answer to violence is always more violence. Back in the day I'd talk some about peacemaking sometimes, and invariably I'd be walking down the hallway that day after church, and this one guy would say, "Give war a chance." He was smiling, but he meant it.

But the teachings of Jesus challenge everyone who does not want to forgive, everyone who does not want to extend grace to others, everyone who needs enemies and needs to hate them, who wants to hate Rome and who can never see the good in a foreign centurion. And it will arouse real anger. And so Jesus heading knowingly for his own cross – he is the first casualty – warns his followers that none of this is for the faint of

heart. Just telling the truth about anything will make you hated. By someone. Maybe by lots of someones.

But all this goes deeper still.

– Dale Pauls

Part Two (of two) next week