

## Fire (and the graveyard of low expectations)

Luke 12:49-56

The 13<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost

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Christ the King, New Brighton

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I don't know about you, but I sometimes simply can't believe the words that come out of some people's mouths. That seems to be especially true in an election year, maybe particularly *this* election year, but even at other times. Sometimes it's just the complete lack of logic or reality that makes someone's words so incredulous. Like my brother and sister-in-law hearing from their landlord that they would have to get rid of their cat because he was pretty sure the cat was attracting mice.

Or sometimes, we hear something that's actually quite good, but we just can't seem to allow ourselves to believe *who* said it, wishing that is the quote had come from someone more recognizable, more renowned, more respected. Like my classmate in seminary once wrote on a birthday card to me: "As renowned theologian Walter Bruggemann has recently said, 'America is only as good as your next door neighbor,'" a profound insight when you stop and think about it, but one, as it turned out that was not, in fact, a quote by renowned theologian Walter Bruggemann, but rather the lyrics of a song by a local bar band named "Celtic Elvis" that some of us had heard live the night before.

Or sometimes we can't believe our ears when we hear something spoken by someone that seems so utterly at odds with who we believe that the person speaking to be. Like the first time I heard my mom drop the F-bomb, or when the scoutmaster whom I looked up to used the "N" word as if he had been saying it all his life. Sometimes, we simply cannot believe the words that come out of people's mouths.

On some level, that is where I find myself as I consider the gospel text for today. "Do you think I have come to bring peace on Earth?" Jesus asks. Why yes, Jesus. Yes we do. Isn't that what the angels sang on the day you were born? Aren't you the one prophesied by Isaiah who would be called wonderful counselor, mighty God, everlasting father, Prince of Peace? Isn't *that* why we all think you've come to bring peace, Jesus?

"No," says Jesus, "I have not come to bring peace, I have come to bring division" Division in families, divisions in households, division in neighborhoods, yes, even divisions in congregations and churches and cities and nations. Fathers against their sons, mothers against daughters, brother against sister, and everyone against their mothers-in-law. Division, I tell you, not peace. I have come to bring fire on the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! Yes, I have a fiery baptism with which I **MUST** be baptized and I simply will not rest until it is accomplished.

These words from this Sunday's gospel reading are not the words we tend to associate with Jesus. These are not the words of a "gentle Jesus, meek and mild." These are not the words of the Jesus whose portrait we tend to imagine, as one of my seminary profs used to say "hanging up in the Sunday School rooms of our minds." These are the words of an angry Jesus, of the Jesus who overturned the tables of the money-changers, who cleared the

temple with a whip of chords. This is the Jesus of divine justice, of righteous indignation, of brimstone and fire. This is a side of Jesus we're not always that comfortable seeing. A Jesus who not only speaks of a coming fire, but who actually wishes it were already here.

These are not the words we expect to hear from Jesus as most of us have come to imagine him. Like the hammer of God described by the prophet Jeremiah in our first reading, the baptism by fire of which Jesus speaks is dangerous, destructive, even deadly. The hammering fire of God's justice is not the stuff of hallmark cards, it is not the quote we'd find on the bottom of our "precious moments" statuettes. It is not what we have come to expect from Jesus, certainly not in the relatively mild, therapeutic form of Christianity that seems to rear its ugly head from time to time within large swaths of the Church.

And while the gospel of Jesus Christ is indeed good news, that doesn't mean it's simply endless bliss all the time. Yes, our God is in the resurrection and new life business, but what Jesus seems to be saying here is that you can't get to resurrection without passing through death; and sometimes in order to embrace the *new life* offered to us in Christ, we have to leave behind all or part of the old life. Hence the refining fire, hence the division, hence the somewhat angry Jesus reminding us that there is *more* to following him than our receiving an immediate and unremitting sense of only the happy emotions. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer once said, "If we water down the gospel into an emotional uplift that makes no costly demands on us, then the cross is an Ordinary Calamity."

I have just returned from the ELCA's Churchwide Assembly in New Orleans, and while there I heard more than a dozen of the best sermons I've ever heard—six of them actually in worship, and as many more cleverly disguised as annual reports, keynote speeches, or ministry presentations the plenary floor, in workshops, or even by the semi-famous MC in his banquet stand-up routine. One of the most stirring of these sermons, the one I found the most challenging to me was preached by James Phillips, an ELCA pastor serving at Our Redeemer Lutheran Church in Washington, D.C. Drawing on his solid Lutheran theology as well as the preaching traditions of his own African-American community, Pastor Phillips retold the story of Easter morning, according to the Gospel of Mark. He told of the three women, Mary, Mary, and Salome going to the tomb, early on that Sunday morning, in order to complete the burial ritual they had so hastily abandoned two days before, since the Sabbath was fast approaching.

On the way, we are told, they seemed preoccupied, greatly concerned, worried even about how exactly they were going to roll the stone away from the entrance to the tomb. Little did they know that the stone had already been rolled away, and that their worrying was for nothing. Still, they were all consumed by a problem, a problem that had already been solved, something Pastor Phillips suggested we still do in the Church—we try to fix a problem that no longer exists, rather than looking ahead to the promises and possibilities of God's future.

But he went on to describe these women as people who had come to that graveyard on that Easter Sunday morning with no expectations of anything happening beyond what had always happened. They expected to do what people always did when they came to the graveyard—to grieve, to cry, to wonder why, and to somehow get on with their life. About the last thing they expected was to find the risen and living Jesus there.

Pastor Phillips went on to say that from time to time, we in the Church find ourselves just like those women—stuck in the graveyard, with no expectations. No expectations of resurrection and new life. No expectations of things being different, or of change being good. That's not what happens in graveyards. But when they encounter the risen Lord right then and there, these ran—ran away from the graveyard toward a place where they could both meet up with the risen Jesus again *and* begin to tell others all about it. Like those three women on that first Easter morning, we are called to get out of the graveyard and to raise our expectations about what God in Jesus Christ can do.

When we think that God cannot fashion our church into the inclusive, multicultural, good-news sharing, servant church of all ages that God is calling us to become, that's graveyard talk, Pastor Phillips said, and we need to raise our expectations.

When we bemoan that fact that our churches no longer hold a preferential place in our society, rather than figuring out how to offer our witness in the midst of tons of other voices that people are hearing, that's graveyard talk, and we need to raise our expectations.

When we look back with exaggerated sense of nostalgia for what has been, rather than looking forward to new ways to be church together for the sake of the world, that's graveyard talk, and we need to raise our expectations.

When we dwell on all the ways that things have gone wrong, or worry about the all that things that could go wrong—still harboring grudges about something that didn't go my way, or picking apart little things that are less than perfect in our congregational life, that's graveyard talk, and we need to raise our expectations.

When we repeat things we may have heard in whatever context about our congregation going *bankrupt* in just a few years—whatever that even means—rather than taking stock of both the absolute abundance of gifts, talents, and treasures that exists among us, more than enough for the ministry God is calling us to undertake, that's graveyard talk, and we need to raise our expectations.

Like those three women that first Easter morning, Jesus is calling us to run away from the graveyard, to run toward a place where we can both encounter the risen Christ *and* begin to tell others all about the joy we have found in knowing the risen and living Lord. Like those three women on that first Easter morning, we are called to get out of the graveyard and begin to raise our expectations about what God in Jesus Christ can do.

See, I think that's in order to startle us out of the graveyard and get us up and running toward him that Jesus used this dangerous, destructive, even deadly image of kindling a fire to burn on the earth. But as dangerous a thing as fire can be, we know that also has purifying properties. A refining fire clears away impurities and strengthens that which remains. Just as Jesus' anger has a function and a place, so does the fire he looks forward to kindling. While such a fire certainly may inspire fear and trembling in each of us, God's fire can also work in us to burn away all that is harmful or unnecessary in our lives, strengthening and refining all that remains. In Jesus, God kindles a fire that destroys all that is lifeless within us and among us, in order to bring resurrection new life.

With that baptismal fire burning within us, let us run from the graveyard of low expectations. Let us run toward the risen and living Lord, Jesus Christ. Who calls us to raise our expectations, who promises to be with us through it all, even to the end of the ages, who declares that he is making all things new—even us, even here, even now. Thanks be to God. Amen.