

Sermon Text: Luke 12:49-56

Let us pray. Holy Father, may the words of my mouth and the meditation of every heart be acceptable unto You, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Now, I know many of you have heard that Scripture, perhaps not in awhile, haven't studied it, haven't heard it preached in awhile. It is an unfamiliar Scripture. It is a very difficult Scripture. A few people always say, “That's not in my Bible!” I've never heard that before.

It sort of reminds me of the time I asked my secretary, when I was in a little church in Rock Hill, she had been a Baptist her whole life, and was about 62, and I said, I asked her, “Bertha, what does your pastor preach about when the passage from John comes up of Jesus' first miracle, turning water into wine. Obviously, it's about actual wines. What does your pastor, knowing your particular congregation, what does he say?” She said, “You know, I don't think I've ever heard that preached on.”

We ignore certain passages. I've heard it said that preaching through the Bible using the Lectionary, which assigns us text to get all through in a three year cycle pretty much all of the Bible, is a guard against the sin and the laziness of preachers. It may well be. The Lectionary forces us to deal with subjects and texts that we would just as soon ignore such as this one. This is not Jesus, holy infant tender and mild, is it? But it's not just here in Luke. It is also, in almost the same form, you find these words in Matthew and Mark as well – so we dare not ignore it.

Jesus is predicting division and wishing for fire. Now, Billy Graham tells a funny story of a fire that broke out in a small-town church, and when the fire brigade, the volunteer firemen, came with sirens wailing, they all got there. The minister was there, and he recognized one of the men as one of his long-lost members. The minister chided him. He said, “Hello there, Bob! I haven't seen you in church for a long time.” The firefighter, who was struggling with the hose, looked back at him and said, “Well, it's been a long time since there's been any kind of fire in this church!”

In the Scripture, especially in the Old Testament, fire was a symbol of God's presence and God's actions. You will remember the swords of fire guarding the Gates of Eden. They could not return. The fire destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah, and God spoke to Moses from a burning bush. God appeared and led the people of Israel in the wilderness as a pillar of fire. Elsewhere in Scripture, God's word itself is likened to fire. God's word is fire. It's fire that burns away the trivial, that burns away that which keeps us from being fully God's. It tempers God's people like steel, and forges us into instruments that God can use, burning away the impurities.

Jesus, the very word of God made flesh, can be likened to fire. You'll remember that John the Baptist told the people that Jesus would come and baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire. It says in Luke 3, “He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire –

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His winnowing hook in His hand to clear His threshing floor and to gather the wheat into His barn, but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.” A sense of judgment and a sense of purifying, a sense of changing.

God’s spirit on the day of Pentecost is pictured as fire; so Jesus is the word made flesh, and that word is like fire, and the fire can burn away evil and can strengthen us and temper us for the work of the kingdom. Fire cannot do any work without causing upset and change. Fire is a force that causes change, and change is never easy. There are always those who do not want changes. We have a vested interest in the status quo. Jesus is telling His followers that if they follow Him, they will find themselves at odds with those who resist change. If they seek to spread the fire of God’s word, some will do their best to stamp out that fire and to stamp out those who spread that fire.

Remember as Jesus speaks, as He speaks these words about fire, He is on the way to Jerusalem, on the way to the cross. Those who do not want the changes that Jesus calls for will put Him on the cross. Those who do not want changes will persecute the followers of Jesus and chase them out of Jerusalem. In that process, whole families were destroyed, divided, over their decision, some of them deciding to follow Jesus as the Messiah.

True story. At the beginning of a class in college, a professor read a letter that a parent had written to a government official. The parent complained that his son, who had been given every advantage, who had gone to all the right schools, who was on his way to a promising career as a lawyer, had gotten involved with a strange religious sect, and members of this sect now seemed to control their son’s every move and motive. They had cut him off from friends and even from family. They had taken all of his money. The father asked the government official to do something about this dangerous religious group. After reading the letter, the professor asked his students to just guess which religious group to which he was referring, about which the father was writing. Some said, well, it could have been the Moonies. Others said, well, some satanic cult or another. Some guessed that it might have been the Jehovah’s Witnesses. Then the professor explained that the letter was composed of excerpts of actual letters written in the Third Century to Roman officials complaining about this group known as the Christians, the Christians.

Jesus didn’t want to split up families, to pit father against son, daughter against mother, but Jesus knew that some would follow and others would not. As sure as fire burns, families would be split up. If you devote yourself to the life of radical love that Christ demands, that the word of God demands, you are going to make somebody unhappy! If you follow Christ, you run the risk of losing the support of some friends and some family. These are hard words, but this happens, and I know about this.

I remember sitting at the Beacon Drive In in Spartanburg years ago, and telling my father that I felt a call into the full-time preaching ministry. His reaction was one sentence. He said, “You’ll never make much money.” I told a close friend. He said, “Jim, you’re

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smart. You could be something.” Well, maybe that’s not division, but from friends and family, I didn’t get much unity or support either. I guess the message was why would you devote yourself to something that matters so little! You know, a lot of people do say that religion, all religion, is the same. Every faith is the same as another. We’re all going to the same place. Well, as Bishop Will Willimon suggests, he said, “This is merely a way of saying religion is wonderful as long as we first all agree that it doesn’t mean anything.”

Serious faith does matter. In fact, it causes division from the cultures’ status quo and multiplication of God’s gifts and your potential that He’s entrusted within you. Following Jesus has always caused some division. In the earliest days of Christianity, it could cost you your life to reject the worship of the Roman gods and of the Roman Caesars and to follow Jesus as the Messiah, the Messiah of the one true God. Back then, if you were from a serious, born into a serious Jewish family, it could cost you your family relationships. They would hold a religious service for you as if it was a funeral, and you were dead to them if you followed Jesus as the Messiah. Today, today, in most Muslim countries it is still illegal and punishable by death to convert to Christianity. You will be reminded of that. Two cases last year made the news, one from Pakistan and one from Afghanistan, that underline that fact.

We forget growing up – when and where we have grown up – how radical a thing it is to publicly follow Jesus Christ and how it can be when taken seriously – divisive!

Now, what about multiplication. Well, a church united in following Jesus will result in multiplication. Remember the little boy who gave his lunch, a few fish and few loaves of bread, to Jesus, and Jesus used it and multiplied it to feed 5,000. I think the point of that whole story is that when we give ourselves as meager as our gifts are, as meager as our resources may be, when we give ourselves to God, God multiplies the gift and multiplies the talent, and the result is to affect huge numbers of people.

If your faith has never caused division of any sort, that means something. If your faith has been followed by multiplication of gifts or witness or new members or new ministries, then that means something else.

Now, you’re going to wonder where I’m going with this, but I think it makes a point. Have you ever seen these television commercials? I know you have if you’ve watched TV at all. People ask each other if they’re gelling. Are you gelling? I like the one where there’s this guy that wants to be a part of that, but he really has no clue what they’re talking about. He’s yeah, I’m gelling, what is it? The soles of these people have experienced something new and wonderful as they place these gel-filled inserts into their shoes. Well, to turn a phrase, that’s what happens to those of us who recognize God’s grace at work in our lives. Our souls here experience a new reality. We know we are loved, and we know we are forgiven, and we know that we deserve none of it, and we know that God wants all the world to experience what we have. Because of what we know, we are different than we used to be and we are different from the world around us.

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We have seen the fire that Jesus brings to earth, and we, too, are anxious for all eyes to be open and see the light of God’s grace and salvation. Eager to step out from the status quo and see that God is doing a new thing in our lives and a new thing upon the earth, a new creation, not based upon law, but love. Not based upon destroying enemies, but forgiving them. Not based upon judgment, but grace. Amazing grace that saved a wretch like me.

As far as the section of Scripture about reading the signs, the best I can do is paraphrasing it this way. The world is messed up and everyone in it, and surely you must be able to see that. Don’t pretend that God is in His heaven and all is right with the world. That’s obviously not the case. We need to follow someone who knows the way out of this mess. That someone is Jesus. Following Jesus means following Him along the way in the spirit of not my will, but yours, Father; not my will, but yours. Doing it Jesus’ way means not to withdraw from the day-to-day struggle, but to serve others in the day-to-day struggle, which is life for all of us. Doing it Jesus’ way means being rooted in the life-giving soil of His rule of love and order to grow in forgiveness, to grow in compassion, to grow in understanding, and then, and then when you do that, I’m afraid your secret will be out! They will know that you’re a Christian! When you grow until it shows they will know that you’re a Christian.

I remember one time I heard a story about a pastor, who saw a member at the door, and said, “Are you ready to serve in God’s army?” He said, “Well, I’m, I’d like to be in the secret service.”

If you grow and you show the love and the compassion and the grace of Christ, it’s not going to be a secret. It shows. Our souls. Christ came to set the earth on fire and our souls filled with the fire through the baptism of fire. The fire, the passion, for ministry. He claims our total allegiance. Jeremiah, the prophet, said, “I have a fire in my bones!” He’s filled with God’s spirit. It consumed his life. It was the focus of his life. Giving God your total allegiance can be messy in families. It can be messy with your friends. It can be messy in churches and all around. It is dangerous to get that close to God.

C. S. Lewis wrote allegorically about God in The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe. Aslan, the lion, was sort of the God character, and about that lion, a character says, “God is good, but God is not safe. God is good, but God is not tame.”

An encounter with God will change you. You lose control when you give yourself to God. Division is a must. Division from where we were and from the status quo is a must because we are not just a little bit off the path. We are lost, hopelessly lost, and often, too often, we believe we are leading God’s parade as we march self-righteously further and further away from the kingdom that Jesus died to bring. The purpose of the Gospel, an old preacher saying says, I don’t know who first said it, is to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable. I think this particular passage does more afflicting, afflicting of the comfortable. Jesus is saying here that our commitment to Him will affect every relationship in our life. We cannot follow Jesus without it affecting or perhaps even

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afflicting our relationships with friends and family. It will change our pattern of living. It may bring about a real crisis, a point of choice.

Christ certainly came to bring peace, and as every page of the New Testament confirms, He did come to bring peace, but He stood for real peace, not a fake and a fantasy peace of just ignoring what is wrong. Scripture elsewhere says, “We cry peace, peace, but there is no peace.” Jesus recognizes in this passage there is no peace. Read the signs. There is something wrong with this world. There is something wrong with each of us. As followers of Christ, we are committed to fight against the evil within ourselves and within the society in the light of the guidance that God has given us. It is a battle against greed and selfishness, against cruelty and violence and oppression, against injustice and pompous lies and indifference wherever they may be found including within our hearts. The Gospel is a Gospel of peace in the midst of strife, not peace through apathy or evasion of responsibility. The presence of the Holy Spirit of God in Jesus Christ ignites a fire, which not only gives life, but also purifies us. It destroys the impurities that render us incapable of loving one another as Jesus has loved us. Jesus came to bring us that fire. He wants it to burn in us so brightly that it lights up the world around us and people notice. That’s our witness. So I encourage you to pray to God for strength, determination, and faith, to do instead of just pray, to become instead of merely wish. The seeds of God’s spirit, Christ’s spirit, are planted in your heart. The flame is built-in brick on our building representing that God’s Holy Spirit is here. It is on our building. It is in our hearts.

This is your pastor’s prayer. This is my prayer. I wish your little lights would gather together. You know the song that we sing, “This Little Light of Mine?” This little part of God’s spirit that is mine. I wish your little lights would gather together into a flame to show God and the world in ways that would shame my dull imagination. I wish that we could have that kind of unity, that each of our little lights and bits of God’s spirit and talent and potential and wisdom we have gained from pain would gather together and burn brightly in a flame, too bright not to be noticed, a flame that would show God in the world in ways that would shame my dull imagination. May God’s Holy Spirit multiply our gifts, our faith, our outreach, and our identity first as His people. Once we know who we are in Jesus Christ and the change He offers, nothing can ever stay the same. Yes, change is a part of life. May God change and grow us toward His will and away from whatever holds us back. May God divide us from what holds us back and multiply His gifts within us. Amen.