

Sermon for August 7, 2016 – 12th Sunday after Pentecost

Luke 12:49–53 (NIV84)

Theme: Jesus' Wildfire

- 1) *Kindled at his bloody baptism*
- 2) *Is still raging throughout the world.*

⁴⁹ "I have come to bring fire on the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! ⁵⁰ But I have a baptism to undergo, and how distressed I am until it is completed! ⁵¹ Do you think I came to bring peace on earth? No, I tell you, but division. ⁵² From now on there will be five in one family divided against each other, three against two and two against three. ⁵³ 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."

Are wildfires good or bad? At first impulse we would say bad because they consume and destroy vegetation. But wildfires can be good in the sense that they renew certain types of land. Sequoias and Lodgepole pines, for instance, need the heat of fire to open their cones to disperse seeds.ⁱ Native Americans long noted how the occasional wildfire would help forage producing grasslands and encourage the growth of fruit bearing shrubs.ⁱⁱ This observation led them – every so often – to intentionally set fire to grasslands. The DNR's "prescribed" burns are a continuation of this practice.

Wildfires are scary. They consume and destroy; but they are also beneficial and necessary. They purge the land and encourage new growth. Let us keep this observation of nature in mind as we meditate on our sermon text today, under the theme: **Jesus' Wildfire:** 1) *Kindled at his bloody baptism,* 2) *is still raging throughout the world.*

Part One: Kindled at his bloody baptism

Jesus once told his disciples: *I have come to bring fire on the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled!*

What exactly is the fire that Jesus wanted to bring upon the earth? In our 1st lesson we heard Jeremiah describe God's Word as a fire; is that what Jesus is talking about here? Sort of, but not quite. Rather (as Jesus intimates just two verses later) the fire he would bring is the division God's Word causes because many people refuse to accept it.

But why would Jesus want to kindle the fire of division? For the same reason the DNR might kindle a controlled burn. You see, nobody really likes a physical fire because of the destruction it causes. At the same time, the DNR understands that controlled burns are necessary to purge and renew the land.

In the same way Jesus doesn't find pleasure in the fire of division. He wants all people to be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth – and it's for this very reason that he sends His life saving Word into the world. However, here's the problem: the sinful nature inside of man rejects God's Word and refuses to believe it. Why? Because it loves sin. People don't want to be told that they are wrong: that the things they enjoy are harmful. They don't want to hear that they can't save themselves. The sinful nature is utterly opposed to God's Word – unable to tolerate it.

But here's the thing: without the Gospel, there can be no salvation. The truth about sin and grace needs to be preached if people are going to be saved. That's why, even though we don't take pleasure in the division this fire causes, we still rejoice that his Word is being proclaimed because it saves and renews those who receive it in faith. How does it do that? First of all God's law burns away the selfishness that captivates our hearts by showing us our sins and the punishment we deserve because of them. And then, the Gospel shows us what Jesus did to win our salvation – telling us that, through faith in Him, we are forgiven of all sin and holy in His sight. The Gospel gives us a new life of peace with God for all eternity.

Now, in order for God's Word to be effective, Jesus had to accomplish what His Word said He would accomplish: our redemption. This is why He said: *I have a baptism to undergo, and how distressed I am until it is completed!*

“Wait a second,” someone might ask, “wasn't Jesus already baptized when he spoke these words?” Yes, he was. “Then what is this Baptism he is talking about now?” It's a special baptism that gives all water baptism its power to save: it's Jesus' baptism of blood. Let me explain what I mean.

Baptism is basically a ceremonial washing, or purification. The purification (or baptism) Jesus wanted to go through was a purification from all the sin he bore. You see the Bible is clear: simple water can't wash our sins away. *“The law requires that nearly everything be cleansed with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness.”*ⁱⁱⁱ Jesus bore the sins of the world. The only way he could be purified of them is through the shedding of his blood. This is exactly what he did on the cross: shed his blood, to purify himself from all sin. This bloody baptism is the reason our sins are forgiven – for the sins Jesus bore were not his own, but ours.

“But,” someone might ask, “if Jesus is talking about his death on the cross, why does he say that he is distressed until it is complete?”

That's simple: because his sacrifice for our sins would cause him great pain. Jesus did not look forward to his suffering anymore than a pregnant woman looks forward to the pains of child birth! And yet, just as a pregnant woman looks beyond the pain - eager to endure it so that she can hold her child in her arms - so also Jesus looked beyond his suffering on the cross, eager to give birth to our salvation. It's only because he willingly went through His bloody baptism that we stand forgiven and at peace with God.

Jesus' bloody baptism on the cross is the spark that kindled the fire of His Gospel – a fire he cast upon the whole earth at Pentecost when he visibly poured out the Holy Spirit on his disciples so

that they might proclaim his life saving Gospel to the world! And do you remember the visible sign that accompanied that event? Tongues of fire appearing over the heads of his disciples!

Sadly the devil and world stand in opposition to this Gospel. They do everything they can to prevent people from believing it and persecuting those who do. They don't want the LORD as their God. They burn with hatred towards him and his followers.

Part Two: Is still raging throughout the world.

Foreseeing this reaction, Jesus warned his disciples: *Do you think I came to bring peace on earth? No, I tell you, but division.*

“Now,” someone might ask, “why does Jesus say this? Doesn't the prophet Isaiah call him the “*Prince of Peace*”?^{iv} Didn't the angels proclaim peace at Jesus' birth?^v On the night before his death, didn't Jesus say to his disciples, “*Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you*”?^{vi} Doesn't the Bible clearly say, “*We have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ*”?^{vii} How then can Jesus say that he did not come to bring peace when the Bible clearly says he has?”

Yes, Jesus did come to bring peace, but not the worldly kind – as he himself once said, “*Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives.*”^{viii}

The peace that Jesus brought is foremost a peace with God. It is the peace of knowing that our sins and guilt have been taken away from us through Jesus' bloody baptism. We no longer have to fear God's wrath. Heaven is our certain home. We also are at peace with fellow believers, regardless of their backgrounds, culture, class or gender. We all share in the hope of salvation given to us through the Gospel. We work together for the common goal of spreading the Gospel, as we use our unique talents and abilities to support one another.

This wonderful peace Jesus offers to all, but, since this peace can only be received through faith, not everyone has it. You see, the people of this world seek a different kind peace. They want the peace of not being responsible to God. They want the peace of believing whatever they want to believe and doing whatever their sinful hearts desire.

The world likes living in the fantasy of this kind of peace – pretending that all is right. But then God sends his servants out to preach His Word. The world now hears the condemning voice of God – convicting it of all kinds of evil, selfishness and sin. God's Word tells the world that it is corrupt and that it needs a Savior, and that Jesus is that Savior. Whoever repents of his sin and looks to Jesus in faith will be forgiven and have eternal life. The world hears this message and hates it. It cannot tolerate the Gospel and hates us for both believing and sharing it. And so wherever God's Gospel of peace is shared, worldly division and discord will soon follow, as the devil and his allies do all they can to suppress the proclamation of God's Word.

And no group in society is safe either. Jesus says: *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."

Yes, rejection of the Gospel can even tear families apart. Many of us have experienced this first hand as we reach out to an unbelieving family member in love, only to have the person misunderstand our attentions and attack us for what we believe. In some countries, Christians have been killed at the hands of their unbelieving family members – all because they tried to witness the Gospel to them in love.

The fire of division – especially when it's in a family – is a very hard thing to face. Like a wildfire, it rages and destroys almost everything in its path. We sometimes wonder if anything good can come from it. Yes, God can and does allow good to come from the evil of division.

He uses it to test and strengthen us - teaching us to trust Him at all cost. He wants the exercise of our unquestioning faith to serve as a public testimony of who He is and the love he has for us in Christ Jesus. You see, when others in the world see our patience and hope in the face of hostility, they may be drawn more and more to find out about the Gospel, and the hope of salvation we have.

Many people love blaming Christians for all the division and discord in the world. They say: if only you would learn to accept people as they are without making them feel guilty, then we could finally live in peace. But here's the thing: without the Gospel there can be no true peace. Why not? Because, without the Gospel, there is no salvation. But with the Gospel there is true peace, forgiveness, life and salvation. This moves Christians to hold on to Christ in spite of the division caused by people rejecting it.

But it can be incredibly hard hanging on to the Gospel when your family – the very people you love the most – persecute you for your faith. How should we handle this when it happens? Handle it in love – asking God to help you remain faithful to him as you both lovingly and prayerfully witness the Gospel. Who knows, maybe after some time, the LORD will cause the fire of division to die out in the hearts of our unbelieving family and friends that they might repent and believe. It has happened in the past; whose to say it won't happen again? More importantly, remember Jesus' words in His sermon on the Mount: *Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven.*^{ix}

Discord and division are the wildfire Jesus' kindled at his bloody baptism. It's a fire that still rages today.

Understand, however, that the Gospel did not cause this fire, rather its caused by people rejecting the Gospel. Remember also God's promise to work in all things for the good of those who love him. May this truth sustain you whenever you face ridicule or persecution for the Gospel's sake. God will keep his promise and, in his time deliver you from it. Amen

ⁱ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Controlled_burn

ⁱⁱhttp://www.dnr.state.mi.us/publications/pdfs/huntingwildlifehabitat/Landowners_Guide/Habitat_Mgmt/Grassland/Prescribed_Burning.htm

ⁱⁱⁱ Hebrews 9:22 NIV84

^{iv} Cf. Isaiah 9:6

^v Cf. Luke 2:14

^{vi} Cf. John 14:27

^{vii} Cf. Romans 5:1

^{viii} John 14:27 NIV84

^{ix} Mat 5:10-12 NIV84