

“The Great Turning”
10th Sunday after Pentecost – Aug 14, 2022 – Luke 12:49-56 /C

Let me start by asking you a difficult question: When was the last time your heart was broken? Or, perhaps this one might be easier: When was the last time you were deeply moved? The human heart is an amazing thing – capable of great love and great anger. But, as my preaching professor taught us in seminary, the point of preaching is “to move the heart” – to crack it open and break down the protective barriers which the Bible calls, “hardness of heart.” Alas, these days there is a lot going on that frightens us, disgusts us, angers us – OK. But *moves* us? Not really. Perhaps it would take something like a Global Pandemic. Something like a Culture of Violence. Something like a Divided Nation. Perhaps even in the midst of that we are too secure, too advantaged, so it takes something *sudden, shocking or surprising* to crack us open, to help us feel, to get our weary attention.

And that is exactly what God was doing through Jesus in today’s Gospel. We are not hearing these words from the lips of the “What a Friend We Have in Jesus” Jesus, but as a John Ylvisaker song says it, from a “*Jesus (who) was sent to upset and annoy...*” This is not the “gentle Jesus, meek and mild” that we like to teach our children about, but Jesus the Prophet - on his way to Jerusalem – the “*city that kills the prophets; and stones the messengers sent to her.*” This is God’s ultimate messenger, and we might even see him as God’s “Hail Mary Pass” to get through to our stubborn, weary and burnt-out human hearts.

Even before Jesus began his public ministry, John the Baptist, famous for baptizing with water, said of him, “*He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit, and with fire.*” So today we hear Jesus yearning for that very Holy Spirit fire to be kindled, and warning the disciples what the effect of that kindling will be: division - right down to the building block of Jewish society - families. Jesus’ demeanor is not one of peacemaker, for he is about to lay down his life for his friends, for you and me. People are his passion. The children of God. His brothers and sisters, his siblings, his family. And it was that deep love which put him in the public eye - squarely at odds with religious leaders, Temple police, evil spirits and possessing demons, local authorities and finally - with the Roman Empire.

In fact, the only folks who he didn’t upset were those who had no hope: Tenant farmers and fishermen, shepherds, lepers and the unclean; outcast, possessed; the walking dead, poverty stricken and aliens. They loved him because he did not practice the expectations of the ruling powers, but lived out God’s kingdom and God’s rules. He treated each one of them as something precious: widows and orphans, friends with no bread to serve, a guy in a ditch; Pharisees and followers, beloved and betrayer – he just loved them all. And that got him killed. The kind of kingdom that Jesus was proclaiming was not about the powers of this world, but about the merciful love of a God of grace. So he forgave us, and loved us too, until the end.

Bad popular theology has done so much damage to our religious foundations that we might imagine the God that Luke describes as a God who just can’t wait to throw sinners into the fiery furnace. As a result, people choose to see only ‘that one time’ that Jesus got angry, and turned over the tables in the Temple. But Jesus was filled with righteous indignation that was modelled by his life and his actions as they are expressed throughout all four of the Gospel accounts. We just don’t like to meet this Jesus, so we wait until he calms down and a nicer story comes along.

But these difficult sections of the Bible should test us and our beliefs. If we do our reading, research and our prayerful reflection well, this questioning of our assumptions about God should lead us to talk about how we - as individuals and churches - answer questions like: *Who exactly was Jesus? What was his message? How did he participate in his society, and how worried should we be about the effects of this fire that Jesus wants to kindle among us?*

The fire Jesus speaks of is the Holy Spirit that was poured out on the disciples on the day of Pentecost. It is a creative spirit that begins by insisting that the truth must be told. New Testament Professor Matt Skinner says, *"Fire is, after all, about refining. And refining hurts...(so) we resist Jesus. Therefore (Jesus) also speaks of the division his message brings..."*

Most of us have merely a passing acquaintance with fire, and our impressions are either "fire=Bad" or "fire=Good." We may think of it as God's Judgment raining down on Sodom & Gomorrah, or the fire to destroy the Golden Calf. We might go so far as to think about burnt sacrifices, or the destruction of wildfires. But for most of us, fire conjures up the happy, warm flames of a campfire with our family close by and a s'mores in our hand, or snuggling up by the hearth in the Autumn with a crackling fire in the fireplace. We might even remember holding individual candles at worship on every Christmas Eve since we were children.

But for the ancient world it meant so much more. It meant illumination, warmth, cooked food and metal tools, pottery vessels for everyday use. For them, fire was life. In the Bible, FIRE most often symbolizes ***the presence of God***. And today we have Jesus coming "to bring" fire to the earth. That word for "bring" is really better translated as "cast" or "flung" - Jesus has come to fling God's presence all over the world, much like the Sower who so abundantly and exuberantly sowed those seeds! Jesus has come to remind us of God in the Burning Bush, and in the salvation from a Fiery Furnace. A God who brings baptism with the Holy Spirit and with fire, and then came Pentecost, and they all learned that fire, GOD'S Fire - IS life! God's presence is LIFE.

Some of us have returned to watch ***The Chosen*** and to experience the portrayal of Jesus of Nazareth as someone that we can relate to even today. The reason that it moves the heart is that we are not just seeing Bible character comes to life, but real people (disciples) responding to him from their own lives and experience. Thus, the words on the page that we've become alive in our hearts - and we fall in love with God again the way we did when we were children. Some have even become so connected to the story and the One who first told them, that they aren't sure they will be able to bear it when he accepts the cross, even knowing that his death will bring new life. The old story becomes real again in our experience.

Is it possible that God knew that when Jesus came to live among us, to share our lives and share God's love, that at some point the relationship might break our hearts? Is it possible that God knew our hearts had become so hardened that they would have to be broken open for something new to sneak inside? Is that what it means that "God suffers with us" because God knew how much it would take to crack our protective shells and to peel us away from our own selfish pride to help us surrender to the tremendous love that God wants to give us?

I will reflect on that this week, and I invite you to do the same. Because why would we knowingly LET our hearts be breached? Do we remember that we have been called through baptismal waters and Holy Spirit fire ***to pass along*** - the good news of Easter, of

God so loving the world, of hope to the hopeless and of a God who is always with us - to those who come after us? Is it our “great cloud of witnesses” – cheering us on from eternity – that help us be bold? Think about all of them from your life and from this church. This is who we are for others and that is who we will be for those who come after us in the faith.

Let's face it, folks, this is hard stuff. “Being on fire” is being passionate about God and God's Kingdom - and how Jesus wishes that we were already kindled! But that kindling requires us first to be vulnerable, and to give in to God's agenda before our own - because the fire that he cast upon us is God's fire: It is the fire of LOVE; the fire of LIFE. And it's the hardest thing to kindle in us because it costs us our hearts, our very selves. But it is our calling...God's Work. Our Hearts.

Hear how Episcopal Bishop Steven Charleston, a member of the Choctaw nation describes our task:

“I do not know why we were made believers during the time of the great turning, but there we are. We are one of the hinge-generations, people living in historical periods of great and deep change. We did not choose this for ourselves, but I believe it was chosen for us by a power greater than we can comprehend. Our task is to help as many people as we can to make the transition safely and in peace. We may not live to see all of the outcome, but what we do today will alter reality for many generations to come. Let us accept this mission with a courageous humility and go forth together in faith.”

Now we turn to celebrate the Eucharist, where we were nourished on a broken heart and a poured-out life. Come, eat and drink. And have your hearts moved, broken and strengthened for the new life to come, in blessed assurance that we are never alone in being made new. Amen.

Pastor Susan Langhauser
Advent Lutheran Church
Olathe, Kansas

Resources: Matt Skinner for Working Preacher August 2019; “Christian Politics” – 8/14/2019; “Jesus Came to Break Your Heart” – 8/19/2007; The Chosen series/Angel Studios 2019; Facebook post by Steven Charleston 7/23/2022