

Fire in the Belly

*Sermon preached by the Rev. F. M. "Buddy" Stallings, Vicar,
at the eleven o'clock service, August 15, 2010: The Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost.
Based on Luke 12:49-56.*

“Jesus said, ‘I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled!’” And the good news is? My colleague Lynn Sanders leads a weekly Bible study, which focuses on each week’s gospel lesson. I asked her on Wednesday to gather insights from the group to give me some help on this obviously difficult passage. When she returned, her entire report from the group consisted of two words: “good luck.” Another helpful friend quipped that I should title the sermon, “When Bad Gospels Happen to Good Preachers.”

It is ironic that this gospel occurs in a week when the New York Times ran an article claiming that most churchgoers really want their preachers to convey messages of comfort and ease, that being stirred up and made uncomfortable is not what we look for on Sunday mornings. Oops. The marketing side of me—the side that wants to fill every pew every week—makes me think that in mid-August we would do well to give door prizes for all who come. But no such luck: I get to tell you that Jesus came to bring fire and that he wishes it were blazing now!

My first thought is to diminish its message, to distance these words from what Jesus really is likely to have said. That is never hard to do, but once we leave the camp of literalism we embark upon a slippery slope. It is one on which I live, but it is slippery nonetheless. Among the Synoptics, this particular verse is unique to Luke, a fact which could allow us to surmise that Luke perhaps was just having a very bad day. But, alas, the gospel of Thomas, has a very

similar quote: “I have cast fire upon the world; and look, I’m guarding it until it blazes.” Great! Thomas’ Jesus is so delighted with his work that he is guarding the little fire until it blazes, leaving us with the conclusion that there is significant evidence—found in two sources—that this sentiment on the part of Jesus existed in the tradition.

Basically I don’t like this passage because it challenges my view of Jesus, a view I hold very dear, as a beatific, peace-loving sort of fellow. Why look for a confrontation under every rock? Everyone knows that you can catch more flies with honey than with vinegar. But I guess transforming lives is different from catching flies. The message sometimes has to have an edge; sometimes it must scream for us to get it; and even then it is hard—particularly in matters religious. The Times article seemed to be based on the notion that religious people look to spirituality, to faith in part to find refuge from such turbulence, to find a space where what is expected is found, where what is old and comfortable is unchallenged. Alan Jones, the former dean of Grace Cathedral in San Francisco, tells of a conversation with a faithful wealthy dowager (are dowagers always wealthy?) in his parish, who was furious with him for making so many changes. In exasperation, she finally said to him, “Can’t you just leave our darling church alone?” I get that! I like our darling church, too!

Recalling that exchange somehow helps me understand this passage better. The one who comes bringing a message of change, after an initial period of being thought novel and

intriguing, generally encounters incredible opposition. In our culture, such leaders are rarely killed; but they are uniformly opposed. Isn't it possible that on occasion Jesus got raging sick of all the resistance he encountered, that he became furious at the religious sorts who moved from ignoring him to actively opposing his radical message, that just for one day he had enough of it? In our creedal statements, we bill him as human, fully human and, yet, struggle when the filters allow the occasional flicker of humanness to show up. As long as we keep him fully divine, no matter how impossible and unlikely to imagine, let alone truly believe, he can be so other to us that emulating him is not earnestly undertaken. "We can't be like that, for heaven's sake! We are not divine." We want him to remain arcane, divine and not too demanding.

In this passage Jesus says, "Do you think I have come to bring peace? Forget about it! I have come to bring division." In Matthew Jesus says, "I come not to bring peace, but to bring a sword." I think I prefer a sword to division. At least a sword will kill one of us; division is something with which we have to live—and not for a short time but perhaps forever. Division hurts, and it keeps on hurting. It seems odd that Jesus would be supporting something so painful, pain that most of us in this great room today know something about. Many of us find ourselves in a variety of ways divided from our families; some of us have run from them for our very lives, escaping what we fear would otherwise be death. Knowing that to be healthy requires differentiation rarely erases our deep desire for unity. Could it be in this passage that Jesus is simply, albeit angrily and perhaps hyperbolically, stating the obvious—that to follow his radical message we must be willing to re-imagine our lives, to re-think every foundational relationship in our lives?

Jesus was outraged because his commands to love our neighbor as we love ourselves and to love God with all our heart, soul, and mind had been watered down into some silly and irrelevant codification of do's and don't's. I believe that Matthew's insistence that Jesus came to fulfill the law is about making himself and us comfortable with our Hebrew underpinnings more than it is truth: Jesus was fed up with the law; at least his actions seem so to argue. He had seen it hurt and defeat people all his life; he had seen it serve the powerful and withhold from others the basic needs of life. This passage is saying, "at least be divided over something that matters; at least be at war with one another about something more important than what you do on the Sabbath, be enraged and divided in your pursuit of equality and goodness for all of God's children."

Earlier this week, the Times ran an article about some people who were so enraged with the way the world is that they left their homes, left all that was familiar and profitable to them, going to the other side of the world to care for some of the least in the world. But they did so at great cost: the Taliban executed them, ten medical workers in Afghanistan because they were accused of being spies and proselytizing. I found myself remembering the international community I worked with 30+ years ago in Bangladesh, never terribly unsafe but under martial law a good deal of the time I was there. Many of my colleagues, mentors really, were religious types, some quite evangelical. And, yet, I remember being amazed to learn that proselytizing was far from their minds. They were feeding children, some three-year-olds who weighed ten pounds or less; they were teaching Muslim farmers better techniques; they were bandaging all sorts of wounds without a care in the world about anyone's faith except their own.

These ten people were like that—some religious, some not, all humanists; they gave their lives: Tom Little, Tom Grams, Karen Woo, Cheryl Beckett, Dan Terry, Daniela Beyer, Glen Lapp, Ahmed Jawed, Mahram Ali, and Brian Carderelli. They gave their lives not to proselytize but to bring life and health and sight to a land wracked by war and religious fundamentalism. Each one, no matter how compassionate his or her demeanor, harbored inside some insatiable anger and dissatisfaction with the quality of life for ordinary Afghans. The passion was deep enough to separate them from their families; it often does. And, yet, the father of one of the women, Cheryl Beckett, made an astonishing statement to the Times reporter: "They (and remember he is talking about his own murdered 32 year old daughter) were the hands and the feet of Jesus, not the mouth of Jesus." I don't want ever to forget that comment: the hands and feet of Jesus indeed.

If we seriously attempt to become that anywhere in this world, if we seriously attempt to be the hands and feet of Jesus, others will find our behavior divisive. Radical living wherever we are *even when it is modest in comparison to these ten* always leads to new and dangerous ground. In our liturgy each week, as

we prepare to enter the mystery of receiving the body of Christ, we pray, "And now as our Savior Christ has taught us, we are bold to say, Our Father." Yes, bold to pray, but are we bold to live?

These ten workers who were killed (all of whom considered themselves pretty ordinary, I suspect) were doing something larger than we can imagine, braver than we can dare. Each had found the passion for his/her life. Far from bored, dissatisfied people, each of these martyrs felt fully alive until the last breath of life. Our complex and troubling passage speaks of that spirit, of that passion. Can we hear in these words Jesus' call to follow the ideals that speak our passion, the passion of our lives?

Can we? Can I? I don't know. But if we can, even if it costs us our lives, we will be alive, truly, vibrantly alive until we are not. And nothing in the world is better than that.

In the name of God: *Amen.*

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