

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend David J. Powers

Sunday, August 17, 2025

Before we read from the text together, which we hope you'll join either with your pew Bible or your own Bible, let us go to God in prayer. Let's take a couple deep breaths. Let's breathe in deeply and breathe out. Let's take a deep breath in and breathe out. Together, let us breathe in God's mercies and breathe out God's mercies to others. One more time. We breathe in God's mercies, and we breathe out God's mercies to others.

Gracious Spirit, you are as close as our very next breath. We pray that you would come near this day and in this time. We pray that by your power, you would illumine the scripture that we are about to read together, that we might discern together how it is comforting us and calling us forth. Speak your word to us in this time whether we are ready or not. And may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you, God, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

This is Luke 12:49-52.

This is Jesus speaking.

I have come to cast fire upon the earth, and how I wish it were already ablaze. I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what constraint I am under until it is completed. Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division. From now on, five in one household will be divided. Three against two, two against three. They will be divided. Father against son, 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.

The grass withers and the flower fades, but the word of our Lord endures forever. Amen.

So, if you were with us last week, you know that last Sunday was my first Sunday back from sabbatical—13 weeks of all sorts of different things. You're going to hear a ton about it over the next couple of months probably. I've got enough sermon illustrations to last well, a couple of months probably. And it was an amazing time. And what I loved also was, beyond having the time of sabbatical, as I began to get ready to return to the work of ministry here at Idlewild, there was great encouragement, particularly from the personnel committee. There was a refrain that they kept using. They said, "Make sure you re-enter gently into this place. Be gentle with yourself as you come back to the work." Right? And it was important because if you've spent any time, maybe even just a prolonged vacation away from work, and then we come back in, we have the propensity sometimes just to jump back in—to the same old rhythms, right? To fall back into the same old issues that we left. So, it was a good and wise word to re-enter gently. And then

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the Revised Common Lectionary said, "No! You do not get to reenter gently." Okay. The assigned text this week from the Gospel of Luke does not give us a chance to be gentle. It confronts us with these words of Jesus of fire and family division, and it is a difficult text for us to have to navigate together. It's a difficult passage. And in our tradition, when a passage is difficult, we are taught to lean into the difficulty. We are not taught to ignore the difficult passages, the ones that make our stomachs hurt a little bit, hearing about fire and division. Instead, we're taught to lean in a little little bit more, to wrestle with the intricacies of the text. Instead of turning away, we are to turn to the text even more, to turn it like a diamond to gain a different vantage point, maybe even a more faithful perspective.

This passage from the Gospel according to Luke is a difficult passage, particularly for the images that it brings forth for us. The passage forces us to contend with two harsh images. The first fire and the next family division.

Let's start with fire. In verse 49, Jesus says, "I have come to cast fire upon the earth. I have come to cast fire upon the earth." And that, immediately, if you're like me, gets me a little scared. It sets me back in my seat a little bit, because the image that I often go to when I hear even Jesus speaking of fire is actually rooted more in Dante and bad theology. So that when I hear fire, I immediately go to like a lake of fire, a consuming fire of hell and judgment, right? That's where my mind goes. And so it's important for us then to spend a little bit of time to lean into that a little bit, because all it takes is a little bit of exploration. And you find that in the Gospel of Luke, we have already heard this image used about Jesus. In Luke 3:16, John the Baptist is speaking to the crowd. He's out by the river. Y'all know this story. He's baptizing people, and they are coming forth and they are being baptized and he says, "I baptize you with water" in verse 16 of chapter 3, "I baptize you with water, but there is one coming after me. I'm not worthy to touch his sandals,(right?) He is going to baptize you with the spirit and with fire." And so in the gospel of Luke, what we have from the very beginning is this understanding of fire, not in the sense of something that will consume, but in the sense of something that will purify. That's what baptism does, right? So there is a fire that consumes and then there is a fire that purifies.

And so when Jesus again references this fire in the Gospel of Luke, that is the type of fire that he is speaking about. He's not communicating about impending destruction. He is communicating about the importance of purification. This is why he can rightly say that he wishes the world was already ablaze. He's basically saying, 'I wish y'all were already on fire for the work of God in the world. I wish the spirit had already purified you and the world in a way that the kingdom had come fully.'

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But obviously it hasn't. He's not saying, "I wish the world had been destroyed." Not at all. He's saying, "I wish that you had been so attentive to the purifying work of God in the world that you would have understood the importance of it coming fully and completely. I wish y'all were already on fire for what God is doing." You're not. Or at least not in a way that will purify. not in the way that's going to change everything here. The purification that Jesus is talking about is a different kind of purification. It's...it is from sin, but it's sin in a particular way. Jesus is communicating with this fiery ablaze language, his passion, his hope for the world. Matt Skinner is a professor of the New Testament at Luther Seminary. He puts it this way. "Jesus yearns for the kingdom of God to break forth into the world in all of its fullness. The transformations and justice that the saints in Luke 1 through 3 envisioned are the things that he wants too." And for Jesus, for the world to be ablaze, that means that oppression has to go, greed has to go, idolatry has to go. Same with exploitation and dehumanization and narcissism and any other evils you can name that prevent the flourishing of all people and all creation.

Jesus is hopeful for those contagions to be rendered powerless in the presence of the living God.

And do not be misled. The same passion that he communicates with, he desires his disciples to carry with them as well. He wants them to be on fire for the Lord. But what that means is he wants them to be bent towards justice and righteousness. He wants them to be about this work. If any of us can't appreciate the desire of Jesus, even with the seemingly harsh image of fire, then it's likely we need help in perceiving the world from the perspective of the suffering and the powerless and the sinned against. For they pray, "Thy kingdom come" with a different kind of longing, a different kind of fervor than we do. When Jesus says he has come to cast fire upon the earth, he is saying he wants a group of people who called themselves disciples to be so on fire for justice, so on fire for righteousness that the world can't help but be purified and changed because of their presence in it.

So fire, then, doesn't consume us. It enlivens us. It changes us, and it is what we carry with us into the world.

That's not the only image he gives though. He decides that fire isn't enough. He's given us two bangers this morning. The second—division. "You think I've come to bring peace? No, I've come to bring division. You think that I've come to draw everything together. That's not my purpose here."

In fact, what Jesus seems to be saying, we'll read the verse together here actually. In verse 51, he said, "Do you think that I've come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division."

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This isn't the word that we want to hear either. In a world where division is taking a deeper and deeper hold upon us, it's really not the word I want to hear from my savior. That he's come to be about that work too in some way. But again, our tradition calls us to lean into the difficulty. So, let's do that together. Let's...let's address this idea of division, first personally and then corporately. Okay? When he gives this laundry list of family division, I wonder how you heard it this morning. Some of you, some of you live among families that are divided. Some of you have sat around tables at holidays where father is against son and son is against father. Mother is against daughter and daughter is against mother. Mother-in-law is against daughter-in-law, daughter-in-law against mother-in-law, and so on and so forth. Some of you know in a real real sense what it means to have a family that is divided. And so then when we hear Jesus say a word about division, we might struggle to find that comforting, because if you sit around the table at a holiday and you know that there's a tension that nobody wants to speak to, right? There's an elephant in the room that nobody wants to address. Then you know how painful it is, and you know that you can't truly and fully be who you are. Some of you experienced that in your marriages. Some of you experience that in friendships or other relationships. The people that we are supposed to be closest to, at least the world tells us that, we feel divided against. And that is really, really, really difficult then to hear Jesus saying that he is about that as well.

Let's talk about that personal element.

You need to know that when Jesus spoke this word of division, a familial division particularly, it would have landed heavy on tender hearts. Okay? Because he was speaking it to his disciples. To his disciples who mostly were Jewish, their families were Jewish, right? And as disciples, they were claiming a different savior, a different way of moving through the world. And as you might imagine, when these disciples went home and said, "Mom, dad, you're not going to believe it. I met this rabbi. He's absolutely amazing. I...I think he might be the son of God." They were not met with the joy that you might think, right? More often than not, that would have led to deep family divides. Maybe some would be clinging to a relationship with this disciple, this new disciple of Jesus, but others would have said, "We're never talking to that person again," right? "Not until they understand the error of their ways and come back to the faith of our family." And so his disciples were likely experiencing this sort of division in their own families. And so they would have had tender hearts in hearing this, and they would have begun to question. And so one of the lessons that they would have had to figure out in the moment is that sometimes being faithful to the call of God and the call of Christ creates division. If one follows the way of Jesus in the world, at times there will be relational costs. I was talking with a dear friend who came to faith in her 20s this week. Um, I'm sorry. I was talking with a friend this week who came to faith in her 20s. That was like 30 years ago. And she talked about what professing faith in Jesus Christ

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as someone who didn't grow up in the church, who had created entire networks of friendships with people who didn't call on the name of Jesus either, when she started talking about that with, particularly, her best friend, she found out very quickly that this faith was going to cost her that friendship. Not because she wanted it to, not because she hoped it would, but it's what was going to happen. Sometimes following in the ways of Jesus has relational cost. I think Jesus is speaking this word of division to the disciples as a way of acknowledging their lived experience. "I know this is really difficult on you. I know there's a lot more cost than just leaving your fishing nets. I know that there are relational costs, too. And you need to know that sometimes that division is going to happen. And I'm really sorry. We'll get to the good news in a little bit. But your experience is real. Your relationships are valid. Your tenderness to this is real too. "

So there's this personal element to it. And then there's this corporate element. Sometimes the family of faith, the family of the faithful need to differentiate themselves. Sometimes division is necessary on more of a corporate level. And this is where we're going to get to meddling a little bit. Okay? Sometimes division is necessary when those who claim the name of Jesus, they call upon the name of Jesus, they wave the Christian flag. It's just outside those doors right there. They wrap themselves in it. Those same people do not minister in the ways that Jesus instructed his disciples and instructs us today. Sometimes those who call upon the name of Jesus abandon the calling of Jesus to care for the poor, to care for the immigrant, to care for the outcast, to care for the vulnerable. Sometimes those who call upon the name of Jesus use it as the distinguishing marker of who they are, of their identity.

Sometimes it is possible for them to abandon the very ministry that Jesus calls all faithful disciples to. And in that case, it would be necessary for those who are trying and struggling to walk in the ways of Jesus in a really difficult world, (right?) who are taking seriously the calling to care for the hungry and the poor and to welcome the immigrant. Sometimes it's necessary for that division to even be named.

Sometimes it's necessary to say the Jesus that these folks are claiming to represent is not the one that we meet in scripture. It is not the one who calls us into all the vulnerable places in the world. And, actually, that group is going to say his name more often, and they're going to quote you chapter and verse, and we might not do that all the time, but we need you to know that they do not have, they do not have an exclusive claim on Jesus.

Sometimes it's necessary for a community of faith, maybe even in Midtown Memphis, to say that the ways in which we understand being faithful to Jesus are very different from the ways that have been publicized in the greater narrative of right now.

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People call upon the name of Christ and wrap themselves in a flag and then say this, “I know that Jesus, I know that Jesus called us to minister to the vulnerable, but we’ve got these other things going on,” right? Anytime you hear the but, you know that we are departing from the teachings of Jesus and we’re moving into some other teachings, okay, and so sometimes that division is necessary. It’s more corporate. Jesus is acknowledging that too, even in this moment—the personal division, the corporate division.

As we move to our conclusion, I think there’s a handful of things that we need to keep in mind this day. Chiefly that the author of the Gospel of Luke wanted the people to faithfully follow Jesus. He wanted them to commit their lives to following the ways of Christ in the world.

And so when he invokes the words of Jesus in this way about fire, he is trying to get them to embody the same passion that Jesus brings in his ministry to the world. Not to destroy it, not to undo it, but to purify it. And that’s part of our calling as disciples a couple thousand years later as well. It is right and good and even the instruction of our Lord to be on fire, ablaze even for the bringing of the kingdom of God.

We also have to acknowledge that sometimes that is going to bring costs. It might cost us a friendship. It might cost us an empty piece around a dinner table. I’m not sure exactly what the cost is going to be for you or even for the church. But what I do know is that Jesus says there’s going to be a cost to this. And he knows it better than we do. We’re only in chapter 12 of Luke. We’ve got half of a gospel to go, right? But he knows what the ultimate cost is going to be. He knows what division is actually going to look like when it takes on bodily form. He knows what the cross is going to signify for himself, but also for the world. And because he knows that, he can speak this word that we hear in Luke 12, because he knows that this fire that is going to come with the spirit will ultimately bring about the purifying of the entire world.

And more so than that, he knows that the division that is wrought by being faithful to Christ in this world will not be the final word of God. He knows that part of what he will achieve on the cross is the reconciliation of all things. It’ll be the reconciling of brother to sister, of son to father, of mother to daughter, and in-laws to in-laws. But more so than that, it will be the reconciliation of the entire world.

There are moments in time when it is harder to believe that, harder to see it. And yet as those who call upon the name of Jesus in 2025, we have the same calling as those early disciples did to carry with us the fire of justice, of righteousness into the world and to trust that ultimately Christ

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is reconciling all things. It might not always look that way, feel that way, but it is happening. So wherever you find yourself this morning, as you hear of fire and division, know that the Lord meets you in that place. Christ is working there, not going to leave you there. And that indeed there is good news to be found in this gospel that's been entrusted to our care.

I invite you to pray with me this morning.

We do not want to be consumed, oh God, but we sure do want to be purified. You know the places in our lives even better than we do where that purification is necessary, where we really need to be set ablaze. So we pray that you would bring that spirit and fire that John the Baptist spoke of and then you spoke of as well. We pray that you would bring it into our lives to the places that need purification, that need to be made new. We pray, Lord, also for the tender divisions that we know— maybe with friends or even with our pew family. We pray, Lord, that you will tend to those, that we will know that they are real and true and yet not the final word. So give us courage in these days to be your faithful people, to live up to the high calling of being a Christian. We ask it in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.