

Homily – A Fire in the Church

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I do not like conflict. This may surprise some of you, including my husband. My husband has a peacemaker personality type that specifically avoids conflict, and though my personality is different, I also do not like conflict. I imagine that many of you feel the same way.

Sometimes we don't like conflict because our families of origin taught us that conflict is bad. Disagreements and discord are to be swept under the carpet and hidden. This is true of my own family.

And, sometimes we have experienced extreme conflict in our past, and the hint of any new conflict starts the reeling of our hearts and minds. Many of you have experienced the crazy times associated with divorce and know first-hand the pain of extreme conflict. That pain can get triggered by any new sign of disagreement.

And, sometimes we have been traumatized by violence and we, quite understandably, connect conflict with violence. It can take a lifetime but the pain of trauma can be released. Some of you know the joy of moving from being a victim, to being a survivor, and finally to being a victor. The cycle of healing from trauma can be beautiful, but why does it have to take so long?

There are many reasons that people have a deep aversion to conflict, and today's Gospel reading is therefore, to say the least, unsettling. *"Jesus said, 'I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! ...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 and two against three; they will be divided...'"*

This doesn't seem to be very comforting. As followers of Jesus we like to think that we are focused on peace and love. In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus says *"Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another."* In the Gospel of Luke, when the angels announced the birth of the baby Jesus to the shepherds they proclaimed, *"Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!"* And, in the Gospel of John, Jesus says, *"Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid."* These are just a few of the references to "peace" in the New Testament. I like these sayings about "peace" much more than today's Gospel reading, but Jesus is quite clear that he brings division and discord. Do these words trigger your fear of pain? Is there any way to see this as good news?

Now, I find the answer and some comfort in remembering that the Holy Spirit of God is always with us. The third part of the Trinity is the Holy Spirit, and I think of the Holy Spirit as the part of God that gives us life and consciousness. The Spirit is what connects us to one another, and it connects us to the God that is already in each and every one of us.

Our tradition says that on Pentecost and shortly before his ascension, Jesus sent us the Holy Spirit to lead and sustain us. Two thousand years ago, we had that event with the tongues of fire and people that could understand each other even though they were speaking different languages. I find comfort in knowing that we are never alone or without resources in life's journey. The Holy Spirit is with us.

And, in today's Gospel reading about division, Jesus gives us this comfort of the Holy Spirit, and he speaks about fire. Our reading begins with *"Jesus said, 'I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled!'"*

Setting aside the plumes of smoke from the Gifford fire that we have been seeing and breathing. Set that aside, for in today's Gospel reading, Jesus is not talking about a fire of destruction but a cleansing fire of renewal and new birth. Sometimes we forget that images of fire are not limited to harmful ones. As the Old Testament prophet Zechariah wrote, *"I will put this third into the fire, refine them as one refines silver, and test them as gold is tested. They will call on my name, and I will answer them. I will say, 'They are my people'; and they will say, 'The Lord is our God.'"*

And here is another quote to help you re-imagine fire. French philosopher and Catholic priest, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin wrote, "Someday, after mastering the winds, the waves, the tides and gravity, we shall harness for God the energies of love, and then, for a second time in the history of the world, humanity will have discovered fire."

Let me repeat that so that you can hear it again. "Someday, after mastering the winds, the waves, the tides and gravity, we shall harness for God the energies of love, and then, for a second time in the history of the world, humanity will have discovered fire." There is beauty and wonder and love in fire.

The fire and miracle of God's Spirit is with us. We know that life can be messy, but we don't journey alone. Girded with that knowledge we can then courageously respond to Jesus' call to be his voice in a world that sorely needs us.

We can move beyond a soft, overly sweet spirituality. If "tender Jesus, meek and mild" is what you prefer, then this week's Gospel reading is not for you. But if we

embrace the Good News, then we can move out of our comfort zone and hear the call of Jesus to confront the things in our world that need to change. What can happen to us if we let the fire of God burn through us?

Now, I continue to believe that one of the strengths of our Episcopal Church is that we try to be the middle way and we try to be a big tent. We try to include people of all shapes and sizes and colors. The middle way is an important bridge.

But sometimes a strength is also a weakness. Sometimes it feels like we have lost our capability to be the voice of Jesus. Sometimes it feels like we are so afraid of conflict that we silence our voices and refuse to disrupt the status quo. Rocking the boat can be scary stuff. It makes us insecure and causes us to cling to the status quo. However, I think Jesus does not allow us a "cheap" peace that comes from avoiding issues or pretending that problems don't exist. Jesus wants a deeper peace. In addition, I am firmly convicted that if we do not stand up for our principles and values then it dampens our self-esteem and love of self. Sometimes complacency and fear of rocking the boat leads to consequences that are worse than doing nothing. Sometimes we stop respecting ourselves if we silence the voice of God that is within us.

A caveat. When in conflict do not sink to the bottom. Don't respond to nastiness with nastiness of your own. For you see loss of the high road can be one of the worst outcomes of conflict

Our human experience shows that there is going to be conflict in our world and even in our churches. Jesus says, "you WILL be divided." The question is, what will you do in response to that division? How will you live and love into that division?

Now, before concluding today, I want to give you a call to action about our Church, and by Church I mean the universal Church – Church with a capital "C". I want to call you into conflict in our Church.

Diana Butler Bass is the author of ten books on American religion and cultural trends. Four years ago, she led one of our training events up in Salinas. A few weeks ago Diana Butler Bass wrote an opinion piece for CNN in which she writes that Christianity has a God problem. Specifically, Christianity has diverged onto two different Gods.

Some churches embrace a God who is tough and strict. This God exercises judgment against all who refuse to bend the knee, a kind of emperor God, enthroned in glory. He is a masculine Sovereign, and a winner-God for people feeling displaced in a pluralistic world. This God thunders about lawless mobs and unbelievers. And after

9/11, this militaristic God became more real. Last week I called this type of God the old white man who is a stern judge.

However, other churches continue to focus on a God of love. With this God we have the mysterious Word present from before the beginning of creation. This is a God of compassion who welcomes the little ones and has created beauty in each and every one of us.

In short, some churches lead to a Christian God of power and strength, and other churches lead to a Christian God of love and compassion.

This is an ancient conflict that never quite seems to go away. For whatever reason, western Christianity has a hard time sticking with a God of love.

But, as a minority of white Christians know, and the majority of Christians of color never need be reminded, the God of love is always hanging around, the brown-skinned Jewish rabbi preaching about the poor being blessed and the broken-hearted comforted.

Love your neighbor as yourself.

Do unto others. Let the little children come.

Faith, hope, and love. And the greatest of these is love

We can lean into the Holy Spirit to guide us between these two conflicting Christian Gods. As Jesus says, conflict, even conflict within families and within the Church is a part of our human condition. Jesus calls us to act, even if it means conflict. It is easier to endure necessary conflict when we remember that the loving Holy Spirit is here to guide and strengthen each and every one of us in life's journey.