

Living in the Fire of Christ

This morning's Gospel gives us a very grumpy Jesus. Through much of Luke's Gospel, Jesus educates the disciples and fields questions from the crowd on his long walk to Jerusalem. Here, he does a bit of both, warning his disciples that his ministry will be divisive and scolding the crowd for failing to anticipate how his work will upend their lives.

Sometimes, I think the Gospels only give us part of a conversation. This is one of those times, and our lectionary doesn't help. It skips Peter struggling with Jesus's comments about watchful slaves and omits our LORD's observation that, "from everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required, and from the one to whom much has been entrusted, even more will be demanded." Jesus is getting spun up, but it's still a leap from those words to his prediction of the divisions his ministry will cause. The leap is big enough, in fact, to make me wonder what else Peter said to set him off.

Grumpy Jesus is not my favorite. As we discussed last week, God is the biggest, most powerful thing in the universe, capable of obliterating little old mortal me with a casual thought. God is good, righteous, gracious, beautiful and, when I focus too much on his justice instead of his mercy, *scary*. Jesus, fully god as he is fully human, shares in all of the Father's attributes, including his scariness. I follow Jesus out of love, but I also try not to tick him off. Here, Peter seems to have already done that for us.

But perhaps Jesus isn't angry – perhaps he's just telling his disciples what to expect. John the Baptist foretold that Jesus would baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire. Bible scholar Darrell E. Bock argues that Luke isn't just prefiguring Pentecost here. The Holy Spirit and divine fire work together, purging and transforming the souls of believers. Nonbelievers don't undergo that transformation, so there's a difference between the "purged" and the "unpurged," so to speak.

But Jesus doesn't talk about difference here; he talks about division. One of my sermon preparation practices is to read several translations of the appointed Gospel for the week. Sometimes, the translations vary significantly, which informs my understanding of the text. In this case, the translations were almost identical, and that's informative, too. Jesus says *division*, implying not mild disagreement, but rigorous discord.

Jesus predicts division in the most intimate of settings – the family – and his examples are all intergenerational. Sons and fathers, daughters and mothers, daughters-in-law and mothers-in-law. That suggests a generational divide between older folks who followed traditional religious teachings and younger folks who preferred Jesus's revisionist approach. Tradition said that devotion to God required strict adherence to specific laws. Jesus asked his followers to focus less on obedience and more on loving God and neighbor, on *relationship*. We know from the reaction of the Temple authorities that traditionalists were horrified by Jesus's ideas. There were bound to be divisions, especially between parental figures who wanted to enforce traditional rules and children who embraced the Nazarene rabbi's revolutionary teachings about love.

We see these divisions today, even in our own Anglican family. Bishop Sutton just returned from the Lambeth Conference, a convention of bishops from the worldwide Anglican Communion. Lambeth normally occurs every decade, but there hasn't been anything normal about the past few years. In 2018, Lambeth was postponed for two years over deep disagreements about human sexuality and identity. In 2020, covid had taken hold and nobody was going anywhere. One might hope that disagreements over human sexuality and identity would have settled down over those four years, but they didn't. A group of orthodox bishops, primarily from the Global South, wanted this conference to affirm a 1998 Lambeth resolution that, as summarized by *Christian Today*, “upholds marriage as a union between a man and a

woman for life, while rejecting homosexual practice as incompatible with Scripture.” But progressive bishops, predominantly from the Global North, objected strongly enough that the vote was never taken. The orthodox bishops separately affirmed Lambeth 1.10, but the conference as a whole did not. Talk about division in the family.

Bishop Sutton went to Lambeth. He described the conference in an August 10th televised forum that you can watch on our diocesan website. It’s well worth your time. He explained that the Episcopal Church enjoys outsized influence in the Anglican Communion, thanks to our relative wealth and the force that American culture wields worldwide. Our influence generates understandable resentment elsewhere in the Anglican Communion, which doesn’t help when disagreements arise. Bishop Sutton affirmed that Lambeth was extraordinarily uplifting and that the bishops were able to agree on many things, including the vital importance of addressing climate changes that are ravaging our world. Disagreements on sexuality and identity dominated the headlines, but the conference itself was more positive and fruitful than news reports suggest.

Bishop Sutton might not appreciate my focusing this sermon on a division in the Anglican Communion that he worked hard to put into perspective. But this division strikes me as a particularly apt example of what Jesus describes in this morning’s Gospel. I believe that every bishop at Lambeth is a devout Christian, and that all the bishops at Lambeth did their utmost to live out Christ’s love as they understand it. I am grateful beyond words that the Episcopal bishops stuck to their guns and kept the Anglican Communion from affirming a resolution that would have wounded LGBTQIA+ people worldwide. And I am delighted that a spirit of mutual love and respect prevailed at Lambeth despite profound disagreements.

Jesus assured the disciples, and us, that divisions would be an inevitable product of his ministry. He called out people in the crowd who had come to gawk at the eccentric rabbi without

letting his words transform them. Then, in a passage that today's Gospel reading omits, he demanded to know why his listeners didn't judge for themselves what was right. Put those things together, and Jesus tells us how to deal with divisions, be they in our families, our church, our communities, our nation, or the world.

We Christians have been baptized with the Holy Spirit and fire, but our baptism isn't one and done. Our task is to stay in the fire, allowing it to continually refine us and our understanding of what it means to love God and our neighbor. I believe that the Episcopal Church's vision of welcoming the LGBTQIA+ community and affirming the inherent dignity and worth of every person better reflects the love of Christ than an orthodox insistence that God approves only heterosexual marriage. We can't abandon our vision to foster a superficial unity, but we can't pridefully presume that our vision should automatically prevail, either.

You've heard me preach more than once about the divisions in our country. Today's Gospel is a reminder that our divisions are a divine gift that requires us to do a lot of hard, healing work throughout the course of our lives. In this, as in all divisive situations, I believe we are called to vigorous, humble and continual discernment. We are not to cherry pick Scriptures or warp divine teaching to align with our personal preferences. We are to be open-minded, listening deeply and respectfully to those whose understanding differs from our own. We are also to stand firm in our understanding of God's will, refuting arguments that condemn and exclude, however well-intentioned they might be. Living in divisions created by Christ's holy fire is often uncomfortable. Much has been entrusted to us, though, which means that much more is demanded of us. The bishops of the Episcopal Church have showed us how to live into our baptismal covenant, allowing Christ's fire to transform us as we work toward a more loving and inclusive world. If they could do it, so can we. *Amen.*