

Tenth Sunday after Pentecost
Saint Dunstan's Episcopal Church, Houston, TX
17 August 2025

Luke 12: 49-56

When a hundred random people in a mall in Houston were asked what they thought about Jesus, their answers were what we all would expect: "He is the Savior of the World. He is my friend. He is God. He is my personal Lord. He is the Son of God," etc. When they were asked to list some of the things Jesus did when he was on earth, the answers were also to be expected, "He died on the cross for our sins. He healed many who were blind. He fed over 5,000 people with a couple of loaves of bread and a few fish. He walked on water," etc. No one mentioned any of Jesus' teachings or actions in Luke 11 and 12. These are difficult passages that give us a view into a side of Jesus that is hard to understand. This Jesus challenges us in a direct way that rattles our cages and pushes us out of comfort zones.

Let us set up the stage. Jesus has been on the move from Galilee to Jerusalem since the end of Chapter 9. Along the way, he has healed, taught the disciples, gathered an incredible crowd around him, and performed a number of visible miracles. He has also picked up a tail. The Pharisees and the scribes are monitoring closely what he says and what he does. On 11:53- we hear that "the scribes and the Pharisees became hostile to him and began to interrogate him about many things, lying in wait for him, to catch him in something he might say."

Early in chapter 12, we hear that the crowd "had gathered by the thousands, so that they trampled on one another." During a break from preaching to the crowds, Jesus warns the disciples about the hypocrisy of the Pharisees. They lie in wait conspiring in dark corners, but nothing will remain secret forever. They call him "teacher" in his presence but then plot against him in the dark. After this, Jesus teaches against greed as someone in the crowd asks him to intervene in a family dispute about an inheritance. He gives them the parable of the Rich Fool and encourages the disciples stop worrying about their lives, what they will eat or wear. He says, "Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom. Sell your possessions and give alms. Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." (Lk 12:32-34.) Then he encourages them to be dressed for action and have their lamps lit because he will return one day like a thief in the night. To highlight this teaching, he tells the parable of the faithful and unfaithful slave." (Lk 12:35-48). In that parable, he gives us a jarring image of what will happen to the unfaithful slave

who believing that the Master will never return has abused his fellow slaves and has failed to care for them. That slave, “will be cut down to pieces.”

Now, in the passage for today, he says, “I have come to cast fire and how I wish it was already ablaze. I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what constraint I am under until it is completed!” (Lk: 12-50-51). These words challenges what we know about Jesus. He gives us two important and difficult to understand images: Fire and division. He came to set the world on fire and to cause division to the point that entire families will be in conflict because of him. Let us take each of these two images separately. Fire in biblical theology is an instrument of judgement and punishment for sin. We are told that the Master will separate the wheat from the tares and burn the chaff in an unquenchable fire. Fire is also presented as a refining mechanism through which impurities are burnt, and the pure gold is cleansed. These two images bring about great fears of the eternal fires of hell and the punishment that awaits those who die in sin. There are many times when fire is used as a metaphor for judgement. But this is not the case in this passage. In this context, fire is a metaphor for God’s presence (Exodus 14:24; 19:18; Isaiah 30:27). God appears to Moses, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Elijah and others as a cloud of fire with the power to change very difficult circumstances in the face of the resistance of God’s enemies (Jeremiah 23:29, 2 Kings 1:2-14).

The fire Jesus brings to the world is a fire of change; it is the fire of God’s presence in the world. When Jesus says that he wants to bring fire to earth, he is not talking about setting cities ablaze. He is talking about instituting God’s kingdom on earth. Making God’s presence known throughout the world. Bringing about the peace, justice, mercy, compassion, and love of God’s kingdom. In fact Jesus is saying, “I want a world on fire for God. A world burning with God’s justice and compassion. I want a world so filled with the Holy Spirit that all political and social enmities will cease forever.” But we often hear judgement in his words. “Bad popular theology has done so much to train congregations to hear Luke 12:49 as a description of a God with an itchy trigger finger who just can’t wait to smoke some sinners.” (Matt Skinner, www.workingpreacher.com). But this is not what’s happening here. Jesus is referring to what we say every time we pray the famous prayer he taught us, “Thy kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven.”

Fire also points to the idea of repentance, because fire in fact refines. The only way Jesus’ kingdom will become a reality is if we allow the fire of God’s Holy Spirit to burn away the selfishness of our lives, the arrogance and pride of believing we don’t need God, our disordered appetites for violence and cruelty, our hatred of those who are different from us, our hypocrisy. The only way God’s fire can cover the face of the earth is through humans who are on fire for Jesus and

who place God's kingdom as a value far superior to any selfish gain. Preaching this Gospel of repentance will challenge first century listeners. This is the reason why the message will lead to division. Those who accept the value-system of God's kingdom will no longer tolerate violence and exploitation. They will stand for God's mercy and compassion instead. This will separate them from family members, friends, and their communities. Those who accept the kingdom Jesus came to institute will side with the poor, the disenfranchised, the orphan and widows, the alien among them, and those in need of justice. This stand of love instead of hate will make these disciples persona-non-grata in their world. Brothers rise against sons and sons against fathers. Some will be persecuted and even killed. They will be baptized with the baptism with which Jesus himself will be baptized soon. This is a baptism of rejection, suffering, and death.

Passages like this challenge our complacency and our apathy. They remind us that to be a disciple of Jesus means to be willing to burn with the fire of love that actively works for justice and compassion in the world. It means to allow the Spirit to refine our hearts, burning away our selfishness and apathy. It means to be willing to be baptized with Jesus' own baptism if necessary. It means to seek first God's kingdom of justice and peace.

May our Lord continue to bless us. Amen!