

We're pretty well accustomed by now to Jesus' way of moving. He's a blue collar kind of guy that's not afraid of getting in with livestock. He knows his way around a vineyard, and he certainly sees a better way of living in this world that's a little simpler than what we're used to. We know he's a peaceful guy, he takes notice of lillies and birds of the field. He talks about mustard seeds and parties and wine. He calms his friends when they get riled up, he calms the sea when it gets riled up, he even calms crowds when they get riled up. His eye is drawn to the poor, the outcast, the lost and the rejected. He heals pain, he heals guilt, he even heals sin. He's a gentle guy. I can almost imagine him asking a disciple to step a little lighter next time so as not to harm the grass beneath his feet.

So days like today might come as a bit of a surprise. If you think of Jesus as the 60's era peacenik transferred back in time, today's a real shock. Now that gentle Galilean speaks of fire and division. The man who once said he came not even to change one tittle of the law now says he's not here for us to honor father and mother. He's here to set father against son, mother against daughter. What gives? First off, let's take a gander at that last bit, the setting kindred against each other thing. Yes, it sounds pretty awful. And yes, I'm sure a lot of us here have examples, probably too many and too painful, of times when something about religion set us against our families. So, it's a bit of a shame that today's reading ends where it does. Because in the next few verses, Jesus continues his idea to its conclusion. He says, "Why do you not judge for yourselves what is right? If you take an issue before a judge, then you face the judge's wrath. Sort it out yourself."

Just one chapter earlier, Jesus taught us in the Lord's Prayer: "save us from the time of trial." I wonder, with all this talk today and in the past few weeks about hypocrites, if his call for division is actually a push towards sorting our own stuff out. Think of it this way. There's often something counterintuitive about reconciling with someone that's done you wrong or someone you've done wrong. I will admit, this isn't how it always goes, but often, when we let those wrongs fester, they grow. They grow like weeds in the garden, and left alone, they take over until the garden has to be razed to start again. But tearing out those weeds, whether they're yours or someone else's, there's a resentment or a fear at the beginning of the process. There is division, and sometimes that division deepens at the outset. But in time and with care, navigating that initial division together actually repairs and brings us closer. It's a weird thing about how we're wired, but I promise you, it works. It's not easy, but it works.

Now imagine this on a world-wide scale. We've got a lot of weeds in the vineyard, no question. Wrongs have festered, and they have grown. Vines still produce fruit, but if we're not careful, it's easy to miss what they have to offer as brambles and thorny things move in. Repair doesn't happen by ignoring the brambles. Repair comes by leaning in. We're gonna have to get a little scratched up, might even have to sort out some of our own stuff in the process, but we'll get there. The kingdom will come. And how much better for us if we can show the king the work we've done to clear away the weeds. I think that's kind of the idea. Better for us to fix it than wait for God to get home and see what we've let happen.

But that first part: "I came to bring fire to the earth, and oh how I wish it were already kindled." That's pretty rough. Looking way back, many of the early writers and thinkers of the church linked Jesus' words here to what'll happen later on in Acts. 50 days after Jesus rose from the dead, flames descended from the sky and perched on top of the Apostles' heads, marking them as God's own. And with those flames, they could speak the languages of the world, and the Good News of Christ risen spread. Where there was division, there could

now be hope of peace. Would that *that* flame were already kindled. But it has been. There, in the Book of Acts, it was kindled, and we live in a world now after that unifying flame was lit. So where's our unity? Why hasn't that unity spread and taken over the garden? Why haven't we sorted out our own stuff? So, I wonder about Jesus' longed-for fire and that traditional understanding.

And I also wonder about fire. Fire's a complicated thing. We need it. We respect it. And we even fear it. In the winter, we long for its warmth. In the summer, we savor its smell, and I don't know about you, but I savor its flavors, too. But I have a scar or two from getting too close to it. And I've got family that've lost homes to it. And each year we see more and more of the West Coast threatened by it. From the rest of what Jesus says, it doesn't sound like the fire he wishes he could hurry up and light is a cozy place to gather by. It sounds like an all-consuming and, for him, much needed cure-all 'cause these hypocrites he's been talking about aren't about to repair this world themselves.

But fire is a funny thing. Out on the Great Plains, there's a species of tree, the lodgepole pine, that needs fire. Its cones stay sort of squeezed up and glued shut until the immense heat of a forest fire rages through. Without that fire, new trees just can't grow. The seeds lay dormant, waiting for a fire to be kindled. Other species need the chemicals in smoke to contact their seeds. Others need the ash-laden ground. Others just need the underbrush to go away. Wildfires are terrible things to see, and the immediate aftermath, with blackness everywhere and little sniffs of smoke still rising, can make your heart sink. But lean in. And soon you'll see green again. Hope of new life sprouting where destruction lay. Life always comes back, no matter what we've done to a place, in time, life always comes back.

I wonder if that's the kind of fire Jesus had in mind. A fire that clears out everything, sacrifices everything to give new life a chance to grow and a chance to be seen. When Jesus ultimately dies and rises again, for us, that's everything. But for the rest of the world, it didn't mean much. A rumor flitting through the empire. I imagine, the empire, the world roiling around the Mediterranean, I imagine that looked a lot like fire to a conquered people. Sure, they got the benefits of the empire, to a degree, but mostly they saw terror roaring towards them and licking the sky. And in the aftermath, darkness, despair, and very little hope. With the display of Christ on the cross fanning flames and division sinking deeper. And when the morning comes, still there's only ruin. But in that same aftermath, there's a tiny sprout quietly poking through the ashes. Rome won't hear of this new forest just beginning to grow, not for some time. Shoot, it even takes a while for the closest to those flames to see what's there: new growth in the garden, quietly but stubbornly breaking through, hoping this time to reach the sun before the weeds take hold.

No, it's not a peaceful process. And yes, there's certainly the loss of things we treasure. And yes, there's a part of me that wishes Jesus had been a little more delicate. But even in this complicated and difficult passage with fire and division, there's still God and the flames that break us open. Would that *that* fire were already kindled.