



The Refiner's Fire – Touchpoint for August 10, 2022

Luke 12:49-56 (NRSVA) *Jesus the Cause of Division*

⁴⁹ “I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! ⁵⁰ I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what stress I am under until it is completed! ⁵¹ Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division!

⁵² From now on five in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three; ⁵³ they will be divided:

*father against son
and son against father,
mother against daughter
and daughter against mother,
mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law
and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law.”*

Interpreting the Time

⁵⁴ He also said to the crowds, “When you see a cloud rising in the west, you immediately say, ‘It is going to rain’; and so it happens. ⁵⁵ And when you see the south wind blowing, you say, ‘There will be scorching heat’; and it happens. ⁵⁶ You hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present time?”

Grace and Peace from the Mystery in whom we live and move and have our being.

“I came to bring fire to the earth and how I wish it were already kindled.”

I hate this passage. I want my sunshine and lollipop Jesus back. I want a Jesus who will not only accept me, “just as I am,” but will leave me “just as I am.”

“I came to bring fire to the earth and how I wish it were already kindled.”

NO!!! I want a Jesus who will make all things possible, or at least, all of my selfish dreams and goals possible.

“I came to bring fire to the earth and how I wish it were already kindled.”

Ok, maybe I’m good with that ... as long as that fire is directed towards those OTHER people. “Go ahead and burn them up, Jesus. Send them off to hell.”

You see, when we hear the word ‘fire’ in the bible, we usually go right to the image of Hell. And we are more than happy to direct that fire at others. But the image of ‘fire’ is used in other ways in the Bible. John the Baptist speaks of Jesus bringing a refiner’s fire. In the Old Testament, Israel is led by a pillar of fire by night. Fire has many redeeming qualities, even if I don’t want to get too close to it or have it directed at me.

Here’s the thing, fire can have two purposes. It can destroy, but it can also purify, cleanse. And it can do both at the same time.

Fire can heat your food or burn down your house. It is a force of destruction, creation and purification. We can be engulfed in flames or on fire with inspiration.

If your water system is compromised, what do you do to water to purify it? Set it on fire, boil it.

So fire has many redeeming qualities ... even if I don't want to get too close to it or have it directed at me.

But this passage tells me I have no choice. To encounter the Christ is to encounter fire. A fire not just directed toward others but me as well. A fire not of vengeance but of refinement. To encounter Christ is to be refined.

Look, I'm going to put something in absolute terms, which I always told myself never to do. But here it goes: If you have ever had an encounter with the Divine, the Mystery, God, and you haven't come out different, changed, transformed... I'm gonna wonder what it was you actually had an encounter with. If you've ever read a Bible **passage** and have stayed in the same place, then you've been looking to interpret the Bible rather than having it interpret you. And you weren't looking for a Bible **passage**, but a Bible **cave**.

Now, let me just speak for myself ... the most scary and wonderful thing about encountering the Mystery, is I never know where I'm going to end up.

Whether it be in meditation and contemplation. Preparing these Touchpoints. Or meeting the Christ in others. Usually those I least expect.

The only thing I'm sure of is I'm not going to be the same.

Yeah, it would be nice at times to have a God who would simply affirm everything about me. Why, I might even let that God be my co-pilot.

But seriously, those of you who know me, do you really want a God who won't change a thing in me? Don't answer that!

And neither do I. You see, a fire is my only hope. A refiner's fire. A separating of the wheat and the chaff of my life.

Isn't this what we are saying when we sing, "Create in me a clean heart O God"? Change me, purify me. Apply your fire.

Isn't forgiveness like a refiner's fire? The Divine Mystery looks at you and me and says, *"I have forgotten yesterday's sins. I will re-member them to you no more. They are burnt up. They have gone up in smoke."*

Today, a new day, is forgiveness.

Today is where yesterday died and tomorrow is born.

That is forgiveness. That is death and resurrection. And that is what we encounter in the Christ.

Now, sometimes I wish Jesus would have just come to earth and said, **"This is going to hurt me more than it's going to hurt you."** I would have been good with that. But Jesus is not a Pollyanna. He's a realist. He will undergo a death and resurrection. And so will we. There's no way to do an end run around Good Friday to get to Easter. For him or us.

He will face opposition. And so will we.

So why would all this cause division?

Probably because everyone has gotten used to the way things are. Some of us even benefit from the way things are. And a change in me is going to cause a change in you and a change in you is going to cause a change in me.

And since I've finally figured out how to deal with all the crap in this world, I don't need you to be changing.

My friend Henry Rojas constantly talks about the problems recovering addicts face when they come home. Their family has often made them their pet project, often to the extent of neglecting themselves. But now, with their loved one in recovery, they are lost. And a whole new set of issues and divisions arise.

No longer needed TO FIX the other person, they might actually have to turn and take an honest look at themselves.

In a world, a society, a family, where dis-function reigns, function is a threat. In a world, a society, a family, where sickness is the norm, health is seen as a sickness.

When you have lived your whole life where privilege is your baseline, equality feels like discrimination.

Look, I wish it was, as Eric likes to say, all unicorns and fairy dust... or something to that effect.

But in a world where tribalism reigns, speaking of unity is divisive.

Let me give you an example, if I were to walk into a Christian Church and say, "Because of Christ there is no Gentile or Jew," I would probably get full agreement. It is, after all, a famous biblical quote. But if I were to update it to 2022 and say, in that same church, "Because of Christ there is no Muslim or Christian, Hindu or Christian," what kind of response do you think I might get?

It is not a belief in Jesus that divides people. It is the "Way" of Jesus that brings division.

For those who think the purpose of religion and belief is to permanently separate the good from the bad, a message of forgiveness is divisive. A message of reconciliation is destructive. A message of transformation is dangerous. And that is Jesus' message.

Look, there are people in my life I have come to a final decision about – a final conclusion – and it has allowed me, in total and complete self-righteousness and self-justification, to shake their dust off my feet and walk away from them.

And now you're telling me Jesus is going to come along and renew and transform them. HELL NO!!! Because that is then going to require a renewal and transformation of me and how I deal with them.

And I would much prefer Jesus just throw the fire of vengeance, retribution and destruction at them.

But if the end goal of God is destruction, then why create at all? Genesis tells us creating brings joy and satisfaction to God. And Proverbs speaks of the Divine as delighting in creation.

The fire of Christ is a fire of restoration and creation, as opposed to a fire of retribution and destruction. Yes, I can suppose we are saying Jesus is fighting fire with fire, but this is a fire of love, a zeal for restoration. This is a God who won't stop at anything to bring unity to this world. Our hatred can't stop it. Our tribalism can't stop it. Not even our imposition of death on a cross can stop it. All of that will be burned up and reduced to ashes.

This is a fire of love. This is a fire of healing. This is the one fire we can only pray is all consuming. Consuming all our brokenness. All our divisions. All of us. A prayer that it will not only consume us but burn within us.

You see, a fire is my only hope ... A refiner's fire.

And it's a constant thing. Never ending.

Perhaps it's like being born. Or maybe being born again. That has a nice biblical ring to it. You are born, but that's not the end of it. It's the beginning. Every day, every sunrise, we are born again. Constantly being refined.

So now the fire of Christ is not an eternal fire of punishment and vengeance, but of constantly making new. A never-ending fire of love that wants nothing more than to consume us all. Take us all into it. And resurrect us to something new.

You see, here is the thing with an all-consuming fire. Once it's moved through a place, there is no division. Everything is reduced to ash. Everything is the same. And everything needs to be resurrected.

Ashes to ashes, dust to dust.

In the end, the divisions end. And all can be re-membered, resurrected.

In the end, like at this table, the denier gets re-membered to the body of Christ. So does the betrayer, and the doubter, and the frightened and confused.

In the end, the divisions end. And we are all raised up as one.

When Christ and his fire consume us all.

Amen.

Spirit in the Desert

Opening Songs

Be Still

(The London Fox Taize Choir, Remember Me)

Be Still, know that I am God

Hearken to My Voice

(London Fox Taize Choir)

Hearken to my voice, O Lord when I call. Have mercy on me and answer me.
You speak in my heart, and say, "Seek my face." Your face, Lord will I seek.

Bible Passage

(A passage takes us from one place to another)

Touchpoint

(Where God's story touches our life story)

Come O Lord and Set Us Free

(John L. Bell, The Wild Goose Collection)

Come, O Lord and set us free. Give/Bring your people peace.

Come, O Lord and set us free. Come Lord Jesus, Come.

1. And take our guilt away. Give us your pardon Lord.
2. Free from our self-obsession. Free from each fond possession.
3. Free to affirm each other...as sister and as brother

Reshape the world you made. Let what your hand created...be always celebrated.

The Meal

Lord's Prayer

(The Scottish Festival Singers)

Benediction

A Blessing

(Margaret Rizza, Kevin Mayhew Ltd. Complete Chants Vol.1)

May the Lord bless you.

May the Lord protect you and guide you.

May His strength uphold you.

His light shine upon you.

His peace surround you.

His love enfold you.

May the Lord bless you.