

Casting Fire

In the name of him who endured the cross, despising the shame, and is now seated at the right hand of the throne of God, dear friends in Christ: “O Comforter of priceless worth, send peace and unity on earth ...” That’s what we just sang together: an earnest prayer to God the Holy Spirit for peace and unity – a good thing, to be sure; something we all long for. It is, however, another one of those good news/bad news items. The good news is that Holy Spirit will indeed send peace and unity on the earth. The bad news (at least for the time being) is that the Spirit will do it in the next age, not in this present one.

That’s what Jesus says in today’s Gospel: “Do you think that I have come to give peace on earth? No, I tell you, but rather division” – or in other words, *disunity, conflict, strife*. And not just in a general sense “out there” somewhere, but smack dab in the middle of people’s homes, pitting fathers against sons, mothers against daughters, and in-laws against in-laws. “I came to cast fire on the earth” Jesus said. The fire of which he speaks is God’s Word: God’s Word of Law that condemns all people as sinners richly deserving his wrath and condemnation, and God’s Word of Grace that declares sinners righteous in his sight through faith in Christ Jesus who suffered and died to pay the world’s debt of sin and then rose again. That’s the baptism of fire he refers to when he says he has a baptism to undergo, the baptism of fire he endured for our sakes. And where that fiery good news is proclaimed it lights fires, fires of conflict between those who receive it with joy and those who reject it with scorn.

And make no mistake: there is no middle ground. You are either a disciple of Jesus, or you are not. And if you are a disciple, then you will be at odds in various ways with those who are not. In some it will be expressed in open hostility. In others mocking scorn: “How could you be so dumb as to believe that religious nonsense?” Others will judge your morality: “You Christians think you’re better than everyone else.” Others will be defensive: “Don’t you try coming at me with your Jesus stuff.” There are other ways it comes at you, and you’ve probably experienced most of them. It’s part of the cost of discipleship. The world hated Jesus. It will also hate those who follow him.

No where is this more difficult to deal with than when it happens between family members. In the early days of the Church, most people who came to faith in Christ had been practicing the Jewish religion. They saw in Christ a fulfillment of all they had been believing and doing. Other Jews saw Christ as a dangerous heretic. To follow him was to be deceived – and ultimately to lose your salvation. So, if your son or daughter converted to Christ, they were (from that point of view) lost. It devastated parents, who often then shunned their child. In the Jewish community today, it still happens. In parts of the Muslim world, it can get you killed. Christians in these circumstances are placed in the very difficult situation of having to choose their relationship with Christ over their relationships with other family members.

But, of course, there is division even within the house of Christ, and that’s difficult to deal with too. But we must, because not every teaching that claims to be of Christ is of Christ. Satan is a busy guy, and he would like to lead us astray with his lies. And he disguises himself as an angel of light when he does it. False prophets don’t wear nametags that say, “I’m a heretic.” No, they look and sound good. Their message is attractive. But what they teach is pretty-sounding poison.

That's what was going on in Jeremiah's time. The false prophets had pretty well managed to take over the temple in Jerusalem. The religious and civic leaders along with the majority of the people were fully on board with them. What they were teaching was a message of inclusion. Yes we worship the Lord God of Israel. And we also worship Baal, the sky god of the Canaanites and his wife Ashtoreth. And we worship the sun, moon, and stars. And the various gods of Egypt and other nations. It's all good. Worship is worship, and by it the gods are made happy. And when the gods are happy, they do nice things for us.

It was also a message of immorality. True, the Lord God had given us the Ten Commandments; but the other gods weren't as uptight about such things. They let us get away with just about anything. In fact, they approve of a lot of the things the Lord prohibited especially in matters of sex. So, as long as we pay lip service to the Lord, we can do what we please. It's all good.

I don't have to tell you that from the Lord's point of view, it wasn't all good. He sent Jeremiah to tell his people so, and also to warn them of the judgment that was about to fall. The Lord is about to cast fire on the earth and you don't want to be on the receiving end of it.

Jeremiah's message didn't go over very well. "Oh, man, Jeremiah. Lighten up, dude. You're so judgmental. So intolerant. So close-minded. You sound so angry. Can't you see it's all good. Can't you see that it will all be well?"

Yeah, well, that's not how things turned out. The assurances of the false prophets were proven to be false when the judgment of the Lord fell. It wasn't pretty.

Fast forward to the present day. A couple of weeks ago the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America held its national assembly in Milwaukee (sort of like our synod convention which was held earlier in the summer). I watched some of the proceedings by internet. At one point they were to vote on a statement on interfaith cooperation and mutual approval. It's a 13 page document that in a lot of high sounding, pious language basically says all religions are good. It specifically states that we have no idea of what the Lord thinks of other religions, and since he doesn't judge them, we can't either. When it comes to religion, it's all good. Peaceful coexistence, that's what it's all about.

Before they presented the statement for debate and the vote, they introduced about thirty or forty people who were standing on the stage behind the chairwoman. Some were leaders of various ecumenical organizations within their church body. Others were representatives of other faiths: Unitarians, Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs, and maybe a few more. The visual indication being: it's all good.

One courageous Jeremiah stood up to challenge the statement. He offered an amendment which would have struck out the words about not knowing what the Lord thinks of other religions and substituting them with the words of Jesus: "I am the way, the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father except by me."

Suffice it to say that his amendment didn't go over very well. It was voted down by something like 98% of the assembly. It's so sad. One has to wonder about a church that claims to be Christian and yet votes to exclude the words of Christ in a human effort to make peace on earth.

I say all this not to virtue signal our own church body's theological purity, but rather to show that what was happening in Jeremiah's time is happening in our day too. And the same forces that are at work to undermine the truth in that church body are at work in ours. It starts with little things and moves on to bigger problems. We all want peace – especially in our families. And too often we are tempted to compromise with Christ's truth in order to preserve the peace. Like, say, when a son, daughter, or other family member or church family member gets involved in a sin or lifestyle that is not compatible with God's Law. You know that bringing it up will cause friction. You'll be accused of being judgmental and intolerant. Best, you think, to let it ride. And by so doing you send the message: it's all good.

But it's not good. And the soul of someone you claim to love is in peril. What's the loving thing to do? Cast the fire. Speak God's word of rebuke. That won't bring peace. But then, Jesus didn't come to bring peace. He came to save sinners who are at war with God.

Save them he does by casting the fire of God's Word – the Word of God's Law that condemns and brings sinners to repentance, and the Word of God's grace that assures that for the sake of his innocent suffering and death sins are forgiven. That in turn brings peace with God, the peace that passes all understanding.

And in this age it also causes division. Let's not fear it. Let's embrace it. Let's run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame. Let's pick up the cross and follow Jesus. In his holy name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!