

# Fire and Division

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Hill Avenue Grace Lutheran Church

Pasadena, California

## Luke 12:49-56

Jesus said:

[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."

[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?"

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Grace to you, and peace, from God Our Father and Our Lord and Savior, Jesus The Christ. Amen.

Today's Gospel continues in the "hard sayings" of Jesus. On a cursory reading, it seems to heighten the difficulties of those who want to be a follower of Jesus. In view of our present state in the United States of great division, today's Gospel's ending, "...but why do you not know how to interpret the present time?," seems to really "pour it on." It very well could read, "So what is your problem? What is it about being a Christian in relation to your present society you do not understand?

Well, as a matter of fact, about everything! So, let's take a closer look.

The key words for understanding today's Gospel and having it speak to us are the words fire and division. The word fire refers to the coming and the ensuing presence of the Holy Spirit "like tongues of fire" in the midst of the Christian congregation. This is what Jesus says he has come to do – to set fire to the earth. He comes to usher in the presence of the Holy Spirit in the midst of Hill Avenue Grace Lutheran Church. Fire = Holy Spirit. Holy Spirit = Fire.

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Hill Ave Grace  
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Fire warms. It also burns. Fire gives light. It can also destroy. Yet, no matter what kind of fire it is, it requires fuel – combustible fuel. Christians like you and I are to be the combustible fuel for the fire Jesus desires to light.

Jesus doesn't want any inflammable stuff – stuff that won't burn. Jesus wants us to burn with the Holy Spirit when he sets the match of baptism to us. To burn in service and love and compassion and justice and mercy. To burn in self-giving and ministering to the needs of others. To burn in our zeal for worshipping the Lord. To burn in our eagerness to learn his will and his ways through disciplined study and research in Christian education. To burn in our enthusiasm for teaching his will and his ways to others. And yes, to burn in our pocketbooks for the Lord's work.

So, the question is: what kind of fuel are you, am I, are we? The combustible kind or the useless inflammable kind?

Once in a city like Pasadena there was a church named Holy Spirit Lutheran Church. One night the church literally caught on fire. All the fire trucks in the city were sent to the church to put out the fire. The Pastor came in his pajamas at 2 am to stand there on the church lawn and watch the beautiful church building burn to the ground. In the crowd the Pastor noticed a member of the church, who was not very faithful, who was neglectful about worship and participation in the work of Christ. This member was standing there alongside the rest of the crowd watching the church burn down. The Pastor said to the man, "How is it that you're here tonight to watch the church burn down when before you never bothered to come to the church to worship?" The man said, "Well, Pastor, this is the first time I've ever seen the church on fire."

How about Hill Avenue Grace Lutheran Church? Are you perceived by anyone in Pasadena as being "on fire" with God's work? Would any of our members say they've never seen this church on fire? If, somehow, Hill Avenue Grace Lutheran Church disappeared overnight, would anyone in Pasadena notice?

Of course they would! The fire of God is in this place! Haven't you seen it burn in love of member for member and member for non-member? Haven't you seen it in the congregation's wonderful acts of love and support? Some fires burn – the fires of God – and we never know about them. Others burn and we don't talk about them because we just expect them to burn or because we are the fires burning.

In the short time I've been here, I have seen the fire of God's Holy Spirit in this place. And, of course, we are humbled by it and thankful for it. And we continue to pray for it. Especially in these disturbing and challenging times. Hill Avenue Grace has burned with God's Holy Spirit for 100 years. As we move forward in the next 100 years, God's Word calls on you, as never before, to stir any smoldering flames into a stunning conflagration. To burn as never before with the leaping flames of God's Holy Fire.

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T.S. Eliot, the great poet, was very disturbed by the advent of the atomic bomb, and subsequently, nuclear weaponry. He believed the earth was faced with a choice between living with the fire of Love or dying with the fire of nuclear holocaust. He wrote, "Who then devised the torment? Love. Love is the unfamiliar Name behind the hands that wove the intolerable shirt of flame which human power cannot remove. We only live, only suspire consumed by either fire or fire." (Little Gidding, 1942, IV)

Teilhard de Chardin, the great Jesuit theologian and paleontologist, who co-discovered Peking Man, once wrote, "Someday, after mastering the winds, the waves, the tides and gravity, we shall harness for God the energies of love, and then, for a second time in the history of the world, man will have discovered fire."

Our calling is, with the help of The Holy Spirit, "...to harness for God the energies of love ..." and so to discover and be Jesus' Holy Fire.

The second key word for understanding today's Gospel is division. Jesus said he came to bring division. Division is the inevitable result of fire. Fire inevitably divides.

This means, of course, that being a true Christian will get you into trouble. It can cause your spouse to get after you for being at the church so late at night. It can cause arguments and squabbles in your family over how much you give or don't give to the church. At times, it can cause parents to disown you. When Martin Luther told his father, he was going to put on a monk's robe instead of a lawyer's robe, his father disowned him. And in 1964 on a Sunday afternoon when Mother and I were planning to go to our church for a concert by the all-black Livingstone College choir, my father confiscated the car keys and would not let us go because none of his family, he said, was going to be present in a church with a bunch of n\*\*\*\*\*.

Have you ever experienced division in your own family because of your Christian faith and belief? The same question as it involves you and your friends or neighbors? Heated arguments about immigrants and the extent to which we should help them? Heated arguments about political figures and elected leaders? Heated arguments about the meaning of scripture?

Many of us have seen in our lifetimes the great divisions that occurred among people over the life and work of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and the great divisions that occurred over the Viet Nam war. Now we see divisions almost anywhere we look between people over anything you can name. These divisions, yes, even in our families, still go on over whether scripture opposes homosexuality and over, most recently, whether Jesus is the only way, truth and life to the Father or whether God reveals God's self in saving ways to non-Christians, apart from Jesus.

I could describe vividly numerous other examples of division we have experienced and experience because of Jesus, both inside our families, our churches and our society, but I believe you get the point.

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It is sufficient to say, according to today's Gospel, Jesus brings division as the kind of peace he brings. Not the contented feeling deep down inside that God's in his heaven and all's right with the world. Not soft organ music and tranquilizing stained glass windows. Rather division. The business of being or getting into trouble because you are hot with the Spirit; so on fire with the Holy Spirit that others are forced to make a decision – either to jump into the fire with you and burn with you or run away or run you away. Three against two and two against three. Yes, even in your own family.

It can and will happen, Jesus is reported to say. When you catch on fire with the Holy Spirit, division will occur. Do not be surprised when it happens is the warning.

We try to forget how demanding our Lord can be! “Not peace, but a sword,” Jesus is quoted as saying. Loyalty to Christ can cut into social circles. Stand for Jesus' truth and you can easily be shuffled out of a corporation. Live for the poor and you can be labeled un-American. Give up trying to “make it” in the world and your family can conclude you've flipped. A suburban couple said so bluntly when their daughter joined a Christian commune dedicated to poverty, “We didn't bring our daughter up to be a fanatic!”

This Gospel is flammable! Jesus' holy love can burn away most usual ambitions, can turn to ashes all the amenities and niceties and lifestyles our world approves. His word is fire, sword and wind, and it creates in us a dangerous spirit – the spirit of Love. Selfless Christian love can disrupt all self-investments such as family, nation, race, or even church.

Did you know what you were getting into when you were baptized into Christ? Nothing less than the fire of faith, which is his living Spirit. And nothing less than a whole bunch of certain trouble. The only sufficient comfort we have is that Jesus never ran from trouble. And he is always with us in our troubles. When our families or our enemies make things hot for us, Jesus is in the battle with us, right by our side.

Once, when Martin Luther was at the height of his struggles with the medieval church, someone asked him what he would do if the princes and his supporters deserted him. He replied, “I will be where I have always been – in the hands of God.” This is also our position. There is no safe place for us except in Jesus' presence.

Jesus did not speak the words in today's Gospel to discourage us, but to teach us to face realistically the problems of the Christian life. We can try to do it alone, but, alone, we will always fail. As we realize our Lord is always with us, we are strengthened when we are caught up in controversy and suffering. We do not run from the consequences of our faith. We do not lose heart because of struggle, opposition and division. Our Lord walks beside us through this world. He has set us on fire with his Love and we will burn with it come what may!

Amen.

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