

St. Mark's Church
Proper 15C August 17, 2025
Preacher: Christopher McLaren
Theme: The Marvelous Peace of God
Texts: Hebrews 12:1-7 (8-10) 11-14 Luke 12:49-56

Every time we try to domesticate Jesus, he escapes our attempts to control him for he is the wildest creature in existence.

Dorothy Sayers wrote this about our ongoing effort to domesticate Jesus:

*The people who hanged Christ never, to do them justice, accused him of being a bore—on the contrary; they thought him **too dynamic to be safe**. It has been left for later generations to muffle up that shattering personality and surround him with an atmosphere of tedium. We have very efficiently pared the claws of the Lion of Judah, certified him “meek and mild,” and recommended him as a fitting household pet for pale curates and pious old ladies. (Sayers).*

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

Too dynamic to be safe. We thought Jesus was someone who would bring Peace. I mean the song of the angels at his birth suggested that his mission was peace (Luke 2:14). He made reconciliation and peace the center of his teaching. He even rode a donkey of peace into Jerusalem instead of a war horse. And at his arrest in Gethsemane he stilled the sword of his anxious ear-hacking disciples, “No more of this!” (Luke 22) The overall portrait of Jesus in the New Testament is of a non-violent man walking the way of peace and reconciliation.

But these words of Jesus are a powerful impassioned outburst, showing us the heart of Jesus. He is a man on a mission and he is impatient for it to be accomplished. It seems that the very fire he wants to cast upon the earth is also within him, driving him to be God's anointed in the world.

We might recall the words of Jeremiah, “Then within me there is something like a burning fire shut up within my bones, I am weary with holding it in and I cannot (Jer. 20:9).

The wild-man prophet and cousin of Jesus, Johnny B. predicted that the one who is to come will baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire (Luke 3:16). In the book of Acts, the Church begins with the Holy Spirit's coming upon the gathering of the disciples with a mighty wind and tongues of fire (Acts 2:1-4). All of this suggests that their message will be the way the fire of the Holy Spirit is spread in the world. In a profound way, the casting of fire means a releasing of the Spirit that fires people up with the energy of God and purifies them at the same time empowering them for work in the world as God's people.

But what is it that kindled the fire of the Spirit in the early followers of Jesus. Back to a little bit of Dorothy Sayers:

To those who knew Jesus (him), however, he in no way suggested a milk-and-water person; they objected to him as a dangerous firebrand. True, he was tender to the unfortunate, patient with honest inquirers, and humble before heaven; but he insulted respectable clergy by calling them hypocrites; he referred to King Herod as “that fox”; he went to parties in disreputable company and was looked upon as a “gluttonous man and a wine-bibber, a friend of publicans and sinners”; he assaulted indignant tradesmen and threw them and their belongings out of the Temple; he drove a coach-and-horses through a number of sacrosanct and hoary regulations; he cured diseases by any means that came handy, with a shocking casualness in the matter of other people’s pigs and property; he showed no proper deference for wealth or social position; when confronted with neat dialectical traps, he displayed a paradoxical humour that affronted serious-minded people, and he retorted by asking disagreeably searching questions that could not be answered by rule of thumb. (Sayers)

He was emphatically not a dull man in his human lifetime, and if he was God, there can be nothing dull about God either. But he had “a daily beauty in his life that made us ugly,” and officialdom felt that the established order of things would be more secure without him. So they did away with God in the name of peace and quietness. (Sayers)

All of this is extraordinary and there is more that we cannot forget at the center of the story. The fire of Jesus is found in his death and resurrection that released a whole new power into the world. His uncanny storming of the citadel of death and coming out the other side to startle women at tomb and BBQ fish on the beach in Galilee sent his followers out into the world on a mission of forgiveness and reconciliation that has not ceased. When Jesus’ disciples and followers absorb the power of his death and resurrection (even a little), the fire of Jesus’ life passes into them. When we begin to know the power of Jesus’ dying and rising to new life, we become like the disciples on the road to Emmaus saying, “were not our hearts burning within us.” It is our connection, our remembering, our initiation into Jesus’ death and resurrection through baptism that animates our lives and sends us out into the world to share the good news of God in Christ and the power of God to overcome what looks like death by overwhelming it with life.

This of course is the fire we need to have in our bellies, the fire of life overcoming death. I know you are feeling it, that death seems to be getting the upper hand. I know that you are grieving the losses all around you, in your families, in your work, in your beloved country. It is good to remember that Jesus stood up to power and corruption. Jesus turned over the tables of the corrupt and greedy moneychangers in the temple. Jesus challenged the empire going toe to toe with Herod and Pilate in a battle of wits and wisdom. Jesus upset the status quo and gathered a community of the most vulnerable being homeless himself. In the end, Jesus was executed by the state as a dangerous person because his love was a threat to the people who thought they owned the world.

I take heart in the truth that Jesus had fire in his belly not for partisan politics but for calling out injustice wherever he saw it. Would Jesus take food support away from the most vulnerable in our world? Would Jesus take essential healthcare away from people who cannot afford it? Would Jesus disappear people off the streets into prison camps and separate families behind nameless

faceless forces? Would Jesus cancel life-giving aid to vulnerable people around the globe and end disease prevention on a whim? Would Jesus stand by and watch a humanitarian crisis worsen? Would Jesus pursue profits over the care of creation while the earth warms? I believe that we know how Jesus would answer these questions because of the fire burning within him from the compassionate heart of God.

I take it that this passage invites us to have that same Fire in our bellies. To burn with the love of God for all that God has made.

However, this passage also contains a kind consumer product warning label.

From now on five in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three; 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."*

These are incredibly difficult words. Why do we read this monstrous passage in church? So much for Jesus being a family values guy. Evidently the early Christians found in Jesus' words something true, something helpful, something that was instructive for the experiences they were enduring. Divisions even within their own family structures because of their devotion to Christ were real. The missionaries in Luke's community are coming back and saying, "Listen, there's a family over there in the next town that has broken up because of our gospel. The kids are on fire for God but the parents don't like them going to our meetings and changing the way they live, and we're not sure what to do."

I remember a college professor who came to me distraught about his son who had chosen to become a chaplain with a campus ministry group that reached out to university students. He wanted his son to go to graduate school, get his PhD and take a respectable teaching post or enter a respected profession. The idea that his son would invest himself in helping college students explore and discover a loving, liberating and life-giving relationship with God at such a formative time in their lives seemed a tragic waste to him. His son's discipleship had created a rift between them. His son on the other hand was joyful, alive with passion and fully engaged in the helping young people discover a life-giving faith. Perhaps this passage is not so far outside the experience of some in our midst. father against son
and son against father,

Another parishioner shared with me that her beloved daughter is in a kind of disbelief about her return to the church and to a life of faith. Every time they speak or see one another her daughter

asks her in a mocking sort of way, “Mom are you still on the God train?” It is painful and sometimes more than awkward when those we love are simply uninterested in the Christian spiritual life for whatever reason. The simple truth is that some walk away from the teaching and experience of Jesus, while others embrace the teaching of Jesus and allow it to transform and change their lives into people of compassion, reconciliation and service. As one commentator expressed it. “Jesus is the crisis of the world. Crisis does not mean emergency but that moment or occasion of truth and decision about life.”

While in seminary I took a course entitled **The Christ-Haunted Landscape: Faith Issues in the Writings of Robert Penn Warren, Walker Percy and Flannery O’Connor**. It gave me my first strong dose of Southern fiction, a region where religious issues are always at the core of life and culture. I mention all of this because I want to let you in on a little Walker Percy trivia that may help us to make some sense out of today’s readings.

Tucked into our own musical tradition is a hymn that was written not by Walker Percy, but by his uncle William Alexander Percy (1885-1942). William Percy, an author in his own right, wrote a book called *Lanterns Along the Levee*, a kind of history of the Mississippi Delta region. He also wrote a beautiful hymn found in the 1982 hymnal #664.—It is a meditation on the struggle of faith, the danger of devotion, and the costly nature of grace. The hymn’s last verse is powerful and paradoxical:

The peace of God, it is no peace, but strife closed in the sod. Yet let us pray for just one thing – the marvelous peace of God.

As I pondered the Gospel lesson for today, the words of this hymn drifted into my mind as a musical commentary on this hard-hitting teaching of Jesus.

Jesus is not willing to candy-coat the spiritual life for his followers. He knows, the inevitable conflict between His vision of the Kingdom of God and the kingdoms of this world. Being a Christian, is to embrace struggle in this world because in living for the kingdom of God we will encounter opposition. To be a kingdom person is to live in a way that challenges the way things are. There are those for whom the kingdom of God is too much of a risk, too challenging to the status quo and their beloved version of how things ought to stay. To work for justice and peace in this world because one has tasted the Kingdom of God in Jesus’ life and ministry is to find one’s self upsetting the social order and that can lead one into conflict as Jesus warns.

At times parenting in such a way that your children’s moral and spiritual development is truly honored, in this screen-happy-consumer-mad-world brings the resentment and condemnation of others around you with surprising force. The simple truth is that if you choose to live differently because of Jesus, you can become a target of others discomfort just like Jesus did. It is what the Martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer called *The Cost of Discipleship* because following Jesus does not come cheap, grace is not without struggle and discipline. It requires our deep investment, our life, lived in obedience to the call of God.

The writer of Hebrews reminds us that we are not alone in our effort to follow Jesus:

Therefore since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight and the sin the clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith who for the joy set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame. (Hebrews 12)

The writer of Hebrews is telling us something that we cannot see with our eyes but that we can only know by faith - a holy vision. We have a cheering section in heaven “a great cloud of witnesses” that at this very moment and at every moment this vast company of the faithful are rooting for us from the ramparts of the heavenly realm, cheering us on to follow in the way of Christ. The heavenly stadium is packed and the saints are shouting out words of encouragement hoping that we will be faithful to the ways of God no matter what the cost like those of old

We need this encouragement because following Jesus, being faithful to the Kingdom of God is not easy. As G.K. Chesterton said, “The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting, it has been found difficult and left untried.” For the Christian, Jesus, that enigmatic rabbi, makes all the difference. Jesus’ life and teaching establishes the standard by which the world is judged. One must pay attention to the one who brings fire, who grabs our attention in the burning bush, who challenges the powers of this world through the humiliation of the cross and leads us by a new light, a new way of being. The writer of Hebrews instructs us to “look to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.” Jesus demands that we become attentive to our relationship with God and toward one another in a way that can do nothing but transform us.

The theological writer Marianne Williamson said, “When you ask God into your life, you think God is going to come into your psychic house, look around, and see that you just need a new floor or better furniture, and that everything needs just a little cleaning – and so you go along for the first six months thinking how nice life is now that God is there. Then you look out the window one day and you see that there’s a wrecking ball outside. It turns out that God actually thinks your whole foundation is shot and you’re going to have to start over from scratch.”

It is only in the ongoing struggle, in running the race with endurance that we can ever hope to know the Peace of God which passes all understanding. A peace that exposes the false peace we are tempted to settle for in this world. A peace that leads us out of our own deceptions and into the marvelous peace of the God’s truth in our lives.

The peace of God, it is no peace, but strife closed in the sod. Yet let us pray for just one thing – the marvelous peace of God.

Please turn to hymn #661 in the blue hymnal and sing with me the conclusion of this sermon.