



August 17, 2025

~ Luke 12:49-56 ~

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### Saskatchewan Synod

#### **Luke 12:49-56**

*"I have come to cast fire upon the earth, and how I wish it were already ablaze! I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what constraint 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! 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."*

*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. And when you see the south wind blowing, you say, 'There will be scorching heat,' and it happens. 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?"*

~

Thank God for the cleansing fire of the Gospel

Sisters, brothers, siblings in Christ,

I bring greetings to you in the name of the Triune God, father, Son, and Holy Spirit, from the Saskatchewan synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada. I want to affirm here my joy as we participate in these summer sermon series, one of the visible signs that our church is one and we are in solidarity with one another as we journey. I seize the opportunity to also wish everyone a wonderful summer and a renewing time of rest as

summer vacations wind down and we plan our return to work, to school, and the fullness of church activities in September.

Today we commemorate World Humanitarian Day as we celebrate the selfless efforts of those who respond to crises around the world, often risking and losing their lives while saving lives of people in treacherous conditions. World Humanitarian Day is also a time for us to educate ourselves on the ways in which many people in conflict zones are trapped and die from hunger and starvation as aid is prevented from reaching them. The recent case of Gaza is an illustration of humanity's struggle to respond with compassion to the plight of the vulnerable. It is our prayer that parties involved in conflicts, be it in Israel and Palestine, Sudan, South Sudan, Afghanistan, Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, Mali, Burkina Faso, to name only a few, will always be filled with compassion and allow humanitarian efforts to reach the vulnerable in need. It is our prayer that where natural disasters strike, that we will always have the humanitarian support that is needed to protect and save those whose lives are in peril.

I cannot end this without thanking two friends of mine, and mentors in the College of Medicine of the University of Saskatchewan, Dr. Bruce Reeder and Dr. Gary Groot, who helped train me as an epidemiologist. Dr. Bruce Reeder and Dr. Gary Groot spent many years as epidemiologists and global health experts, volunteering with Doctors Without Borders in Africa to respond to epidemics in various parts of the continent and I especially thank them for their roles during the global Ebola and COVID-19 pandemics. It is people like Dr. Bruce Reeder and Dr. Gary Groot that we are celebrating today who by faith as we hear in today's second reading of Hebrews 11:29-31 are able to do mighty things and who like God as stated in today's Psalm 8:4, "rescue the weak and the needy, and deliver them from the hand of the wicked". Thank you to you and to your church for the contribution you make to alleviate the suffering of others and the efforts you make so that the neighbour near and distant, is rescued from the perils they face and delivered from the hand of the wicked.

Today's gospel text has as key feature the theme of the fire that Jesus wants to set upon the earth. As we hear this, we cannot help but think of the devastating effects of actual fires raging in Northern Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and BC, and chasing people out of their homes and communities. We hold these places, communities, and people in our prayers, as we do whatever we can to respond to their plight with love and action.

We cannot explore this theme of fire without also thinking of the devastating effects of fire through canons, drones, machine guns, heavy artillery raging in various parts of the world and causing death, pain, anguish, famine, injury, death and displacement of millions of people. We hold people affected by the fire of war and fighting of all kinds in our prayer. Finally, we cannot enter into this text without acknowledging the fire coming out the mouths of powerful leaders whose words are like fire burning and destroying the most vulnerable in our society and in our communities. We hold them in prayer. We look within ourselves and the ways in which our words and actions are like fire hurting people around

us, and causing pain, hurt, and suffering. We confess our sins, and commit as disciples of Jesus, to loving the neighbour as ourselves.

In today's gospel text, we are shaken and disturbed when we uncomfortably hear Jesus declare, "I have come to cast fire upon the earth, and how I wish it were already ablaze! I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what constraint 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! From now on five in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three; they will be divided" (Luke 12:49-53a). Jesus continues by naming the types of conflicts that will arise as a result: parents against children, and parents-in-law against children-in-law (verse 53b).

When you add this to the stern words of Jesus in the preceding passages where Jesus warns about the Pharisees and the passage after this text where Jesus urges us to repent lest we perish, a fuller picture of the redemptive work of the gospel emerges. Today's gospel text is not only very challenging, but is nested within a very challenging context for us 21st century comfortable middle-class Western Christians.

Let me offer a perspective into our discomfort as we hear this text. Given the current context of oppression in many places around the world, how do you think Jesus' stern words resonate with the oppressed? If as the body of Christ, we commune not only with Christ, but with each other and with all people, especially the oppressed and the marginalized, how would you hear Jesus' declaration about bringing fire and causing divisions?

Our apathy towards faith and towards the neighbour stems from our lives of undisturbed comfort. Yet our communion with those who live in discomfort helps us see things differently. When we hear Jesus' words and we remember the power of sin that oppresses and the plight of the oppressed; when we remember that Jesus comes as the one who sets us free from our bondage to sin and its oppression, we cannot help but rejoice and be glad. To the oppressor, justice is seen as the enemy. To the comfortable, justice is seen as a threat. But to the oppressed, God's justice is the gospel, the gospel that brings light into darkness and sets the oppressed and the prisoner free.

As is self-evident, the gospel does not bring unanimity. While the gospel sets the oppressed free, the oppressor sees the gospel as a threat. Jesus as the embodied gospel cannot therefore avoid being the subject of divisions even in close family circles. The transformative power of the gospel causes discomfort by shining the light of Christ on our sinful tendencies as the gospel steers our hearts and minds to a more faithful journey with God and the neighbour. The light that shines cannot help but shine against the darkness of our hearts and of the world.

Growing up in Cameroon, these words of Jesus were easily understood as good news given the post-colonial context that still had the country very much colonized but in a new way, with the country's rich resources still controlled by the colonial powers. The colonial

enterprise had benefited many Cameroonians who without even knowing, continued to support the colonizing enterprise. With Cameroonian Christians for the most part taking control of the leadership of the church, faithful proclamation of the gospel led to the divisions Jesus notes in today's gospel text with internal family conflicts as a result of the gospel. Families were divided because of the gospel.

If we pay close attention, we will notice that the gospel does not leave us the way it found us. Jesus' earthly ministry is met with constant attacks because of the challenging nature of the gospel that turns the status quo on its head. Yet, it is this gospel that sets the oppressed and the prisoners free that needs to be proclaimed.

The fire that Jesus brings in his passion, death and resurrection both cleanses us from our sins that have held us in bondage and challenges the systems of oppression that hold people in bondage. The gospel attacks both personal bondage to sin and collective and societal structures that hold people captive. The gospel cannot and will not be silenced as it does what the gospel is supposed to do. As the people of God, called today to be embodiments of the gospel, we cannot be silenced either. We will strive to proclaim the gospel without seeking to stoke conflicts but lovingly sharing the love of God with the neighbour knowing full well that not all are happy to receive it.

It is the fire of the gospel that does its work, cleansing, redeeming, and setting free, while challenging the structures that hold people captive. Let us be open to the cleansing fire that Jesus brings and be the joyful people of God who bring the good news to the world.

May Almighty God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit bless the word in our hearts and in our minds!

*Amen!*