Pastor’s Message “From Division to Multiplication”

I have to say… that Gospel reading hit hard this morning, and honestly, it didn’t sound as “Jesusy” as we’re used to, did it? Let’s face it, we are most comfortable hearing Jesus say loving things like, “Let the little children come to me” and “A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another.” These words of Christ give us warm/fuzzy feelings…

But today, we hear some harsh tones from Jesus. He said he has come to “cast fire [and division] upon the earth”.

This isn’t the first time we’ve heard Jesus sound like he was in a crabby mood though. Remember (in Mark 11) when Jesus was hungry and he cursed a fig tree because it didn’t provide any figs for him to eat (even though it wasn’t fig season)? Personally, I think that story would make a great Snickers commercial(!) …because it shows that we can all get a little “hangry” from time to time.

At the point in the Gospel of Mark when Jesus cursed the fig tree, Jesus had just entered Jerusalem with great fanfare on Palm Sunday…but he knew what trials he would face in the coming days leading up to his crucifixion, so he had EVERY reason to be frustrated (to say the least)!

Today’s Gospel reading doesn’t say that Jesus was hungry, and in the Gospel of Luke, Jesus’ final days don't take place until Chapter 19, so back here in Chapter 12, why does Jesus sound like he’s so frustrated? We don’t know for sure, but he DID have a lot going on.

In the previous chapter Luke 11 (that’s chapter 11 for those of you who lost track), people were accusing him of casting out demons by the power of Beelzebul (you know… the prince of demons…) and Jesus had to set them straight. Also in chapter 11, he had a little “war of words” with a Pharisee and an expert in the law during which Jesus used a lot of “woe to you…” statements. (Trust me, you NEVER want to hear Jesus saying “woe to you” to you!)

Then at the beginning of chapter 12, a crowd of many thousands of people had gathered, and they were trampling one another! It seems to me that Jesus wasn’t acting very “Jesusy” because NOBODY was acting very “Jesusy”(!) so we see that even the King of Kings can become frustrated!

And even though Jesus sounds frustrated to us in our reading today, that doesn’t mean that his words aren’t true. He really did come to cast fire upon the earth and create division amongst people. But what does that mean?

The prophet Jeremiah wrote in verse 29 of our reading today, “Is not my word like fire, says the Lord, and like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces?” My answer to that is, yes(!) because we need to hear the truth (and sometimes… the truth hurts). But wouldn’t we rather have the Lord be honest with us so that we may correct the error of our ways instead of continuing down the wrong path? Of course!

So, when our Lord speaks truth to us, it may feel like he’s casting fire upon the earth because we have to come to the realization that what we’re doing isn’t pleasing to God. Just like the actions of the Pharisees and the experts of the law were not pleasing to God.

Jesus’ words to them were like being hit by a fireball, so they were upset with him and looked for a way to kill him. (Which was just digging an even deeper hole for themselves when they really should have repented for their wrongdoings.)

Another thing to realize is that Jesus really did “set the world on fire” with the way he pointed out how far the organized religious leaders of the day had strayed from the intention of God’s laws. For example, God gave Moses the Ten Commandments so the Hebrew people could know what was expected of them in their relationship with God and their relationships with one another.

The 613 laws of Moses which God later handed down to the Hebrew people were the basis of the moral, ceremonial, civil, and ritual directives, covering both religious obligations and social justice - but when following the “rules” got in the way of how God wants us to serve one another, the truth had to be told, even if it hit like a ball of fire.

Like when the Sadducees confronted Jesus about healing someone on the Sabbath. Jesus asked them if they would save their donkey on the Sabbath if it had fallen into a well. Of course they would! How much more should we then help a child of God who is found to be suffering? This example is just one of many of how we must learn to follow the intent of the law and not always the letter of the law.

But, that didn’t sit well with those who thought they were living righteous lives by following the letter of the law. Jesus was really stirring things up in his day, and that created division between those who felt that following the letter of the law was best and those who felt that Jesus made sense in his teachings to be free from hypocrisy, materialism and self-centeredness.

He did cause division and turned father against son, mother against daughter, etc. But, when the dust settled and people began to see the wisdom in the fire Jesus was casting upon the earth with his teachings of truth, believers began to multiply.

Even amid the early years of Christianity after the resurrection of Jesus, when believers were being imprisoned, tortured and killed for their faith in Jesus… they were multiplying! They used secret symbols such as these to identify meeting places for worship to other believers so they could remain hidden from the authorities. That is the beautiful thing about truth… when people recognize it, they will stand by it no matter what.

You are here because after Jesus caused such great division, there came such great multiplication. We are here because we, (just like those first followers of the Way of Jesus) seek truth and we seek God.

These days, it seems that determining what is truth and what is fiction is becoming difficult, but our words of hope today are that God will always be honest with us… (even when that honesty stings a bit). And we will be better off seeking God’s truth because we want to be able to make well-informed decisions and live our lives peacefully with one another, abiding in God’s multiplying blessings. Praise be to God and Amen.