

Before reading: Listen to the reading with an open mind and open heart. Listen for **one thing** that seems to speak to you, personally today!

But, before you do that 2 things: **1st** Fire is not always destructive. Sometimes fire is used to purify, to burn away what is impure and to refine what is left.

And **2nd:** There is a difference between something that is descriptive and something that is prescriptive; a difference between saying, “This is the way it is” and saying “This is the way it should be.” Jesus in this passage is being descriptive not prescriptive. He is saying, “This is the way the world **is** when confronted with the good news of God’s love for all people”. He is not saying, “This is the way the world **SHOULD** be.” Ok, again, listen to the reading with an open mind and open heart. Listen for one thing that seems to speak to you, personally today.

⁴⁹“I came to cast fire upon the earth. How I wish that it was already ablaze! ⁵⁰ I have a baptism I must experience. How I am distressed until it’s completed! ⁵¹ Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, I have come instead to bring division. ⁵² From now on, a household of five will be divided—three against two and two against three. ⁵³ Father will square off against son and son against father; mother against daughter and daughter against mother; and mother-in-law against daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law.”

⁵⁴ Jesus also said to the crowds, “When you see a cloud forming in the west, you immediately say, ‘It’s going to rain.’ And indeed it does. ⁵⁵ And when a south wind blows, you say, ‘A heat wave is coming.’ And it does. ⁵⁶ Hypocrites! You know how to interpret conditions on earth and in the sky. How is it that you don’t know how to interpret the present time?”

Some of you remember the “me” decade? That was the description of the 1970s. It described the perception that people, especially young people were concerned only with themselves. The “Me generation,” for the most part, embraced entertainment and consumer culture. It was a time when young people seemed to be more interested in self actualization and self improvement than self sacrifice. It seemed they cared more about themselves than about making society better. It wasn’t the only decade with a descriptive name. The 1950s were called, The Nifty Fifties; the 1960s were The Psychedelic Sixties; 1970s were The Disco Era or The 'Me' Decade.

If the 70s was the decade of “Me” then perhaps we could call this the “Us against Them” decade.

It’s a phenomenon not only in the U.S. but around the world. Politics is polarized. Religious lines are being drawn between conservative and progressive. Families are divided based on who they voted for in the last election. The gap between wealthy and poor is sharper than ever in this country that prides itself on being classless: a society in which only individual effort and achievement determine your worth, not your families’ wealth or the achievements of your ancestors or their social connections.

Division is the order of the day. And so people come to church not to be further divided but to be comforted. We don’t want division or disruption at church. We ask pastors to not be political. They probably mean don’t be partisan.

It's been 10 years since the ELCA decision to ordain gay and lesbian people in committed relationships. 10 years since the church decided that risking division for the sake of the message of God's unconditional love for all people was worth the risk. In that time some congregations have left the ELCA. They've mostly joined a new branch of "Lutheranism" They were too conservative to stay in the ELCA but not conservative enough for one of the existing Lutheran groups: Missouri Synod or Wisconsin Synod. So, more division.

Despite the best efforts of the folks who worked for decades researching the Biblical basis for the 2009 decision, despite that they asked us all to do as the apostle Paul advised and "bear one another's burdens" that we strive to understand each other and live together in love and agree that our love for each other and God's love for us is more important than the details of anyone's sexual preferences, despite that, **real and painful** division occurred.

In my opinion the ELCA is stronger than ever. The churches that remained have grown, welcoming folks who long for Jesus' message of love to be the dominant voice that we bring to the world, rejecting the false gospel of judgment based on human, cultural standards.

The ELCA risked division for the sake of being a strong, true voice of God's love and Christ's salvation for the whole world.

Some wise Lutheran writer said, "Every time we draw a line between us and others, Jesus is always on the other side of it." EVERY time WE draw a line between us and others Jesus is **always** on the other side of it.

We've been "Being Brave" for the last few weeks. We've heard Jesus' message about selling our possessions and giving to the poor, his condemnation of those who put their hope in wealth; we've had to be brave in order to hear Jesus' words as good news, as life-giving, as invitation to deeper relationship with God. We've had to be brave **together** to keep showing up and to keep wrestling with these words in these deeply divided times in our country. It would be so much easier to resort back to "Jesus, meek and mild." I would much prefer to talk about the peace that Jesus offers, the freedom and the hope.

Those **are** things that Jesus offers us all; promises us all: peace, freedom, hope. But, the peace, the freedom and the hope that Jesus offers everyone are the peace, the freedom and the hope that **put an end to death**. They are the peace, the freedom and the hope that end **all division** forever, bringing all people, all creation over to the side that Jesus is on until there is no "other" side. Jesus does not offer us an easy peace or an easy freedom or an easy hope. We can make an easy peace, and easy freedom and hope on our own. We don't need Jesus for that!

But, pretending that everything is all right. Looking the other way from injustice so that our **sense** of peace remains intact; keeping our mouth shut so that we don't disrupt the calm in our family, or our neighborhood, our town or our country only maintains the power of the strong to oppress the weak. Our aversion to conflict maintains the status quo that is killing our planet. Our desire to avoid controversy keeps the systems in place that allow guns to continue to take away the freedom to pursue life, liberty and happiness to over 1,000 people just in this year alone.

Our desire to get along has allowed racism to grow until now the number of African American men being killed or incarcerated is out of control and so called “Christian Nationalism” is on the rise.

Our desire not to rock the boat has allowed young women to be raped and their rapist be given community service as punishment because, to quote the judge in the case, “the young man is “from a good family and will go to a good college” and didn’t the “girls parents tell her that accusing this boy of rape would ruin his life?”

It is into just such a mess as this, that Jesus says, ⁴⁹“I came to cast fire upon the earth. How I wish that it was already ablaze! ⁵⁰I have a baptism I must experience. How I am distressed until it’s completed! ⁵¹Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, I have come instead to bring division.”

Not all fire is destructive, deadly fire. But, for Jesus fire is always about judgment. Luke told us earlier in his gospel through the story of John the Baptist, that Jesus is coming with a fire of purification and refinement.

Of course, Jesus bring fire. It’s the fire that burns away all that is unrighteous, all that is idolatry and injustice. That is God’s judgment: that God’s righteousness, justice and holiness is for our sake **and** for the sake of our neighbor.

The fire Jesus wants to kindle is a fire of change, the fire of God’s active presence in the world. No wonder he is so eager to strike the match.

Jesus wants to burn away all that gets in the way of us living **truly** free, with real peace and the hope that gives life abundant and joyful.

We should remember that Jesus grew up in his mother’s home, learning at her side, undoubtedly listening as she sang her Magnificat! (She must have sung it many times over the years instilling it deep in Jesus heart)

“My soul magnifies the Lord,

⁴⁷ and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,

⁴⁸ for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.

Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;

⁴⁹ for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.

⁵⁰ His mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.

⁵¹ He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.

⁵² He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;

⁵³ he has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.

Anyone: Jesus, Martin Luther King, Jr., Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Bishop Oscar Romero, Bishop Desmond Tutu, Daniel Berrigan, you or me, **anyone** who tells the **truth** about the unconditional love of God as shown in Jesus for ALL people, radical love not only in word but in a life lived enacting that love- when we, the church **name that truth boldly**, division will be created.

There **will be** people who cannot imagine that Jesus is asking them to welcome those who they feel don't deserve God's grace. There will be people who cannot abide sitting in the same pews with people who cannot kick their addiction or who keep sliding back into their old ways; those whose work is considered shameful or immoral or those who say one thing and do another. In other words, many of us have a hard time accepting people who are 'human' obviously forgetting that we are too.

Jesus yearns for "the kingdom of God" to become reality in this world. The transformations and justice that Jesus mother imagined are the things that Jesus wants, too. But, for that to be true, for the lowly to be lifted up, for the hungry to be fed means that the powerful cannot remain powerful, the rich cannot remain rich. Oppression has to end. Greed must end. Idolatry in all its forms must end. And so must all exploitation, dehumanization, narcissism, and any other evils you can name that prevent all people and all creation from flourishing. All of those things that prevent God's love from being the driving force in the universe – those things must end.

That is what the church is about. Not a peace that pretends not to see injustice. But, a church that unflinching sees and **names** injustice. A church that walks over to the side of those suffering the injustice and stands with them until the injustice ends.

The church is here to do just that: stand with the oppressed until the oppression ends. Stand with the hungry until everyone is fed. Stand with the marginalized until the margins are erased.

This is a difficult word that causes division because Jesus is always on other side of all divisions! So, just when we think we've got it figured out: we will work to end hunger, work to end oppression, care for the earth and all people – we get there at what sounds like a pretty comprehensive understanding of what it means to "Love God and love neighbor" and then we remember... Jesus is always on the other side of **all division**.

So, we identify the perpetrator, the oppressor, the culprit, the wealthy corporate CEO or the powerful politician who is the cause of oppression, injustice, and death and then we must remember that Jesus is on that side as well! Make no mistake, scripture is clear, beginning to end God is **against** oppression and poverty and everything that dehumanizes even one person; anything that goes against God's truth that every single person is created in God's image and worthy of love; that everyone is God's beloved. AND Jesus is also standing with the oppressor, the white supremacist, the rapist even, the sex worker and the one who solicits sex.

God does not condone the things that hurt others, but God recognizes the deep wound at the heart of every oppressor that allows them to treat people as less than human. God recognizes the pain and isolation and dehumanization that lead the white supremacist to look for someone else to

inflict pain upon. God sees heart of the one who kills because the capacity for human connection was killed in him as a child.

God looks at all of humanity and sees belovedness; every one of us is God's dearly beloved. And Jesus asks us to see that truth in each other; to live that truth with our lives; to continue to reach out to those on the other side until there is only one side and we are all there with Jesus. Amen.

Pastor Val Metropoulos
Amazing Grace Lutheran Church
Aberdeen, WA