

Jesus' "Hot" Words

Luke 12:49-56

"I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled!"

Many of Jesus' teachings are sublime and beautiful, bringing us comfort and peace. A few verses earlier in Luke 12, for example, Jesus calls our attention to the birds and flowers. They can teach us how to be free of worry and fear, how to trust God for what we need. That is an example of the "cool" teachings of Jesus.

Then there are the "hot" teachings that jar us in order to wake us up, like today's reading. Sometimes we need the gentleness of cool words that calm and comfort; sometimes we need hot words that stir us from our lethargy or forgetfulness.

"I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled!" says Jesus. Fire is symbolic, not literal. Here it stands for seeing our lives in the blazing light of God's sovereignty and purposes. The fire Jesus is talking about is a refining process—some things need to be burned away, some strengthened by the fire.

Jesus longs for the kindling of this fire. Why would he say this? Is Jesus anxious for evil folks to get their just desserts? Is he just having a bad day? Maybe Jesus has grown impatient. There is a time for patience and a time for impatience, if it is impatience for the right things. But I think there is more to it. Jesus has this deep, urgent longing for people to let God's reign dawn in their lives. He knows that the world of human beings is not going to really change until people themselves change from the inside out. He knows this is a fiery process that calls for a willingness to be changed, which includes struggle and suffering. This reminds us that the spiritual life, the life that is centered in our relationship with God, means our own transformation. God's love is unconditional, yes. However, God's love is also transformational, a refining fire that makes us new people, the people we were created to be.

Jesus says that he has a baptism that he is hard pressed to fulfill. Baptism means literally "immersion," being plunged into water. Jesus is immersed in living out God's purpose for his life. He feels this inner compulsion to fulfill what God has given him to do and to be, his vocation. We need to be careful here. Jesus is not talking about our being compulsive or obsessed. He is not talking about running around frantically taking on more than we can do and burning ourselves and everyone else out. He is talking about an inward sense of direction and purpose for our lives to which we give our all.

As we commit ourselves to following Christ, we are also called by God to live in particular ways according to the uniqueness of our lives and the gifts God has given us. What profound joy when we discover and begin to live out of what we feel God has called us to be and to do! We are freed from others' expectations of us and from our need for approval or affirmation. We are liberated from the things that would distract us from who God made us to be and what God has given us to do. We too become "hard pressed" to fulfill the vocation of our lives. Hard pressed means that we cannot help but do what we are doing because it is like a fire in our souls. When we are living out of what we truly feel ourselves called to do, when we are becoming the persons we feel God has called us to be, we shape our lives around that call.

Being hard pressed can include "stress," as the NRSV translates it. Living out of a sense of vocation will include times of tension and conflict. It won't be easy. Just because we feel God has called us to a certain way of life or a particular ministry or mission does not mean that that it will be smooth sailing. We must also be willing to suffer, that is, to go through struggles and obstacles, both inward and outward, in order to live what we are called to be and do.

Years ago I came over here from First Christian Church to attend a retreat led by Judith Roark

of the Church of the Saviour. During one of the sessions, she asked one of the most compelling questions I've ever heard: How much are you willing to suffer for the sake of your community of faith? She wasn't talking about developing martyr complexes so that we don't feel good unless we feel bad! She was talking about how willing we are to be stretched and grow, to overcome our self-centeredness and move beyond our own needs so that we enrich and nurture our community of faith. That, I think, is part of the "stress" inherent in being hard pressed to live out God's call in our lives. I want to take on this particular ministry or mission. I feel called to share my gifts in this particular way. What am I going to do when it becomes difficult, when someone is critical of me or confronts me with something about myself I don't want to face? What will I do if the way I envisioned things is not the way that is best or most needed? Will I give up, become angry or bitter, or will I find, through my inward journey, ways of creatively moving forward and growing in my perception of God's call in my life?

Jesus then says he has not come to bring peace to the earth but division. This is a tough one. Matthew has a parallel teaching, when Jesus says he did not come to bring peace but a sword (10:34). Jesus is not talking about taking up arms and engaging in literal warfare. Jesus does bring peace, but it is the peace of right relationships with God. And righting those relationships disturbs the false peace of empires, governments, armies and economic systems. Jesus' peace brings the division of choosing our relationship with God above all other relationships. I think that is why he speaks of families being divided within themselves.

In Mark's gospel, Jesus' family comes looking for him one day while he is teaching (3:31-35). He is told that his mother and brothers are outside looking for him. His response: "Who are my mother and brothers?" He looks around the room at those listening to his teachings: "Whoever does the will of God is my family." The most important relationship we have is our relationship with God and our living out God's purposes and love in our lives. When we make human relationships ultimate we lose perspective. This may sound like heresy. We can focus so much on loving others that we lose sight of what it means to truly love another person. We fall into dependencies, obligations, and idolizations. Then we lose sight of our own identities and callings, while at the same time interposing ourselves in the relationship of others with God, robbing them of their freedom and responsibility. We often love others in ways that are not truly helpful or loving. If we are grounding ourselves first in our relationship with God, our human relationships gain their true and right meaning and perspective.

Now Jesus talks about the weather! We can look at the way the clouds are forming over the Blue Ridge and know that a storm is brewing. We can feel the wind rising and know what kind of weather it is bringing. You are good at reading the weather, says Jesus. How come you can't see what's happening in the "present time"? The word used here is *kairos*, one of the NT words for "time." It means the present moment, the moment in which God is doing something, making something possible. The *kairos* is every moment in its relationship to God, every moment when we are fully aware, sensing God's presence and movement, and then discerning our response.

One of the things I have found so helpful in my work with Zen Buddhism is its emphasis on awareness, on being present. We are seldom in the present. We are preoccupied with the past or the future. Our minds are so full of thinking or worries or planning that we are always somewhere else other than where we are or who we are with, including ourselves. Our living is so controlled by past habits of thought or feeling that we cannot be open to knowing how to respond in the present moment to the realities of life or persons around us. But through practices that help us let go of such preoccupations and habits of thinking and feeling, we can re-enter the present moment and become aware of what is really going on in us and around us.

I think this is just what Jesus was getting at. He is calling us to awareness of the present moment, which is where God is. What is going on now? What is God calling me or us to do now? Who are the people I am with now? What are the needs of the world around me now? As we grow in our capacity to be as fully present as possible in every moment, then we will ask such questions and

find for ourselves the answers. This leads into the last part of the reading.

Jesus asks, “And why do you not judge for yourselves what is right?” If we are doing the spiritual work of grounding our lives first of all in our relationship with God, if we are becoming more aware and attentive to each present moment, its realities and possibilities, then we will have the capacity to know what to do in each situation. This is different from living according to woodenly-applied rules and laws. It is different from seeing everything through the grid of a world view that we have constructed in our minds, which we apply in every situation. It is living out of our relationship with God with spiritual awareness, discernment, and openness.

Jesus gives an example. When you are being taken to court by someone and your case is pretty weak, you had better make a settlement on the way. Otherwise when you get to court, you are going to get hammered! The commentator William Barclay suggests that Jesus may be referring to our relationship with God, which is what Jesus has been talking about thus far. Most of us probably have a pretty weak case when it comes to how we are living our lives as God’s children. If we are honest, we all fall pretty short of the glory of God, as the Apostle Paul wrote (Romans 3:23). So, perhaps Jesus gives us this puzzling teaching so that we will get to work on our relationship with God as the most important relationship of our lives. Barclay may be right and offers us a fruitful reflection on this puzzling passage.

However, maybe Jesus is simply saying that when we are working first of all with our relationship with God and living out of that relationship, we will be able to be more present and perceptive in each moment, knowing what is the right thing to do. Perhaps Jesus is saying something very positive to us, that we have the capacity to live in such a way that each moment becomes a *kairos* moment, full of potential, of promise, of God’s presence and love and purposes. As we become more fully awake in our relationship with God, as we become more spiritually centered, we will be able to decide what is best in each situation. We will not get caught in “winning our case,” so to speak, not caught in our egos, but will be open and able to do what is best in each present moment and circumstance.

All of this points us to the importance of what we call the inward journey. It is the daily work of spiritual awareness, of practicing silence, inner listening, and prayer, of study and growing in self-awareness and self-understanding. It is the daily work of coming alive in our relationship with God and growing in our capacity to hear God’s call in our lives.