

August 18, 2013 / Season after Pentecost / David L. Edwards

Jesus' "Hot" Words

Luke 12:49-56 *"I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled!"*

Our reading from Luke's gospel comes at the end of a collection of teachings found in Chapter 12. Luke sets the stage at the end of Chapter 11. The scribes and Pharisees, representatives of established religion, have become "very hostile toward" Jesus, looking for every opportunity to use his teachings against him. Jesus is a threat because he is not interested in defending or perpetuating religion. He is calling people to embody the essence to which his religious tradition points. The life of loving God and neighbor, of prayer and service, of compassion, justice, peace-making.

The people themselves are flocking to Jesus. Chapter 12 opens: "Meanwhile, when the crowd gathered by the thousands, so that they trampled on one another, he began to speak first to his disciples." The first teaching is: "Beware of the hypocrisy of the Pharisees." Jesus gets right to the heart of things. Hypocrisy is getting caught in religion without living a life that is deeply, authentically in touch with God and expresses God's love in the world.

He continues. Do not be afraid of those who can kill or hurt you, of what people might do to you, or what they might think of you. Know that you are ultimately and eternally cherished and kept by God's care. Jesus warns about attaching our happiness or security to possessions and wealth. Nothing outside us brings lasting, deep happiness, but only our lives in God. Jesus calls his disciples away from worrying about their lives. Strive for God's kingdom, for what matters most, and you will have all you need. "Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also," he says. If our "treasure" is in material things or otherwise ego-centered living, we are doomed to unhappiness. If our "treasure" is the life of loving God and others as ourselves, the most central commandment, we already have eternal life.

Just prior to our reading for today, Jesus speaks about living a life of readiness, of alertness. "Be dressed for action and have your lamps lit." This is a call to wake up to the present moment and our life in God. It is a readiness to perceive what is most important and to give our lives to that. It is a wake up call to seek and find the kingdom of God here and now, to live lives that are fully alive to God and to the needs of the world, so that we become instruments and

channels of God's love for the world.

This collection of Jesus' teachings contains “hot” teachings that are meant to wake us up, and also “cool” teachings that calm us, reminding us to trust, to surrender our lives into God's loving care. Sometimes we need hot words that stir us from lethargy and forgetfulness. Sometimes we need cool words to remind us to live out of God's peace, not out of anxious striving.

Now we come to our reading. Jesus is still speaking to his disciples. “I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled!” Fire is symbolic, not literal. It is the fire of seeing our lives in the blazing light of God's sovereignty and purposes. It is the fire of a refining process—some things are burned away, some strengthened. Jesus longs for the kindling of this fire. Jesus has a 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, to struggle and even suffer so that our authentic life may unfold. The spiritual life, the life 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 the people we were created to be.

Jesus says that he has a baptism that he is hard pressed, or under stress, 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. Jesus is not talking about being compulsive or obsessed. He is not talking about running around frantically taking on more than we can do, burning ourselves out and exhausting those around us. He is talking about an inward sense of direction and purpose for our lives to which we give our all. He is talking about our living with love burning inside us—love of God, love of others, love for the world, and for our own lives.

As we commit ourselves to following Jesus, we are responding to God's call 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 created us to be, we shape our lives around that call. It is our “baptism” to fulfill. It will not be easy, however. We must also be willing to suffer, that is, to go through struggles and obstacles, both inward and outward, in order to discern and 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. She asked a most-compelling question: How much are you willing to suffer for the sake of your own growth and for your community of faith? She wasn't talking about having 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 is part of the “stress” inherent in being hard pressed to live out God's call in our lives. 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? How am I going to respond when my understanding of things is challenged? What will I do when things do not go as I think they should? Will I give up, become angry or bitter, or will I find, through my inward journey, ways of growing in love, self-understanding, and my perception of God's call in my life?

Jesus then says he has not come to bring peace to the earth but division. 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. The core of Jesus' teachings is non-violence, non-hate, something the church mostly continues to ignore or simply rejects. Jesus does bring peace, but it is the peace of right relationships with God, with others, and today it must mean right relationship with the earth. Righting those relationships disturbs the false peace of empires, governments, and economic systems that harm, exploit, and oppress. Jesus' peace brings the division of choosing our relationship with God above all other relationships. 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 living out of God's purposes and love. When we make human relationships ultimate

we lose perspective. We can lose sight of what it means to truly love another person, falling into unhealthy dependencies or unfair expectations and judgments. 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 as he speaks to the whole crowd. We can look at 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 New Testament words for "time." It means the present moment in which God is doing something, making something possible, calling us to respond. *Kairos* is every moment in its relationship to God, every moment when we are aware, sensing God's presence and movement, and discerning our response.

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. 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. Through spiritual 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.

Jesus 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.

Jesus is saying that we have the capacity to live in such a way that each moment becomes a *kairos* moment, full 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 and to what we want to give our lives. We will become less caught in our egos, our smallness or shallowness of vision, and become more perceptive of 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, 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.