

Isaiah 5:1-7 Psalm 80:1-2, 8-18 Hebrews 11:29-12:2 **Luke 12:49-56**

OPENER:

Often when an older sibling comes home from college for the first time, they come back changed in some way. They talk different, act different, or maybe wear different types of clothes. In an extreme example, maybe they get a new tattoo or piercing to shock Mom and Dad. Or maybe they bring home a new girlfriend or boyfriend, perhaps with a new tattoo or piercing, to shock Mom and Dad.

When my older brother came home from college, he brought none of those things, but what he carried was nonetheless shocking and disruptive. He reported to my mother and father that he was thinking about converting to Greek Orthodoxy.

For my family, entrenched in the Episcopal tradition, you can imagine the shock and surprise in our living room as he delivered this news.

For my adolescent, teenage self, you can imagine that this was not as cool as a tattoo or piercing.

My older brother's decision was not designed for shock value (like a tattoo or piercing) rather it was something that can only be described as a sincere religious experience, a "turning" to another Christian denomination, a movement from one thing to another.

The thing he was moving away from was the faith tradition of his youth and of our shared family. And that was hard and a bit hurtful. My parents, to their credit, supported him as they best they could through it all. We attended services in the Greek Orthodox Church and tried to understand it all—its different rhythm, different emphases, all in a different language.

Again as a teenager, for me it just seemed like I was going to *more* church now, and I remember that those services were a lot longer than what we Episcopalians did on Sundays, and that it was all that we talked about for awhile.

Ultimately, my brother was baptized into that tradition, and even changed his name, legally and, more importantly, spiritually.

TEXT:

Our Gospel this morning reads:

“Do you think 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...”¹

My reaction when I read these difficult words is to respond “certainly not.... God is not intending to break families up.”

Then I consider that story in my own life and it kind of makes sense. Kind of. Again, my teenage self would have preferred something else, I would have preferred the “peace” and quiet and normalcy of before. Even with decades of this as the new normal, a part of my adult self would probably prefer the same thing, that my older brother had never experienced this conversion.

It would just have been easier: we could all go to church together, we could celebrate holidays at the same time and place, Easter would be on the same day, and all the rest. The peace would have been kept.

Of course, that peace would have deprived my brother of all of the riches that Orthodoxy has brought him in his life. It would have prevented him from following his spiritual journey in the way that God was truly calling him. All so that I could shut my eyes and pretend like everything was “peaceful.”

EXAMPLES:

I share that story to jostle my memory and yours, to allow us to think about moments where God’s mission here on earth has disrupted our peace and calm and quiet.

I always enjoy hearing from married couples at St. Timothy’s who talk about growing up in one denomination and the spouse growing up in another.

And then they say: “after we got married, we met in the middle, and started to go to the Episcopal church.”

Indeed, our tradition has that as its reputation, a welcoming place to land. But I know that that story, its quick elision of the transition, probably came at more of a cost than is being described.

¹ Luke 12:51-53. NRSV.

One more example: I had a seminary classmate who lived next door to us in the seminary apartments. He was raised in a non-denominational Christian tradition: evangelical, fundamentalist, with a literal interpretation of the Bible, not accepting women in positions of church leadership.

This classmate, when he married his wife, took her name, and would become an Episcopal priest, turning his back, in some ways, on the Christian tradition that he grew up with.

CONFLICT:

So, again, from Luke's Gospel:

*I came to bring fire... father against son, and son against father, mother against daughter, and daughter against mother...*²

Maybe you have examples that are more dramatic than the one from my family, or maybe less so. Perhaps the cause of division doesn't concern the institutional church, or changing a denomination, but I bet you have an example from your life of God causing some sort of division.

What, I ask again, is Jesus up to in these all examples, and in our Gospel passage? Well, first, they remind that Jesus did not come to establish consensus, or to tell everyone that the *status quo* was sufficient, he did not come to win a popularity contest. It would be weird, if you think about it, if Jesus had come 2000 years ago (or today) and said "Everything that you are doing is great, keep on keeping on."

Instead, he brought fire.

It's confusing because Jesus also mentions Baptism, which features water—the opposite of Fire at first glance. But consider our Baptism, this idea of being submerged, of being overwhelmed in flood waters, and then coming out of it and experiencing rebirth.³

And so consider this Fire—not as the fire of judgement but the fire of purification. "not destructive fire... but (the) nourishing fire of good news."⁴

² Luke 12.49, 12.53 (cf. Micah 7.6)

³ Marshall, I. Howard. 1988. *Luke*. Exeter: Paternoster, 547.

⁴ Bovon, François. 2012. *Luke 2: A Commentary on the Gospel of Luke 9:51-19:27*. (Hermeneia Series). Minneapolis: Fortress, 247.

FAMILY:

Now all of that does not make it easy, of course.

I, for one, don't like conflict. I did not like it as a teenager and I still don't like it. So I have to remind myself that division is an opportunity, that conflict is a sign of growth. And, in Martin Luther King, Jr.'s words, that "(True) Peace is not the absence of conflict, but the presence of justice."

In the case of my family, we lived through that fire. Somehow we made it work over the years, but not without pain and conflict. It caused friction, but it did not consume us. Sparks and heat from it fly up every now and then but we have all grown from it.

Fire, of course, is dangerous but Jesus will never tell us to go someplace that he is not willing to go also. This is what the Incarnation means.

Think about Jesus' own family. His mere presence in his mother's womb caused a raging scandal, in his adult life Jesus 'burned bridges' and left his family on the outside, and he was an embarrassment to his hometown. Jesus knew what this passage meant because he had lived it to the core of his being. Jesus' family was not some *Camelot* that we all should aspire to. Rather, it was broken and wounded and damaged where all got burned a few times over. His own family was not spared that fire and division and neither are ours.

CONCLUSION:

So I remind myself that Jesus does not want to come and see the world as it is. Instead Jesus is about making new realities, new creation. Jesus came to tell us that that others baptize by water but Jesus baptizes with fire and with the Holy Spirit.⁵

This passage may scare us because the fire that Jesus brings is dangerous.

But fire sharpens metal, fiery combustion powers our transportation, Fire is threatening and scary, but the flames of Pentecost started the Church.

The fire that Jesus brings burns, but is also life-giving, warming, and protecting, it's the fire that cauterizes wounds, and allows for healing, makes our souls come alive.⁶ **AMEN.**

⁵ Luke 3.16.

⁶ Recall Michael Curry's royal wedding [sermon](#).