

Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost • August 18, 2013

St. John's Lutheran Church, Alexandria, VA

Rev. Braun Campbell

Luke 12:49-53

“Signs of the Church: Division”

Almost one year ago my wife and I got married here at St. John's. In a lot of ways it doesn't feel like it's been a year. I can still remember the assignments from our to-do list that I was carrying out, like going to pick up our wedding bands in the months before the service. Opening the box the first time we got to try them on, our bands were bright and shiny, gleaming on our fingers. Entering into that whole ring-selection process was a learning experience for me, as I imagine it is for a lot of grooms-to-be. It's not just a matter of picking a ring in your size, you've got to find the right metal and design for something you're planning to wear for the rest of your life. Fashions change, and wedding bands are most often made of a precious metal like platinum or gold, but even alloys are options now. I was impressed by the breath of choices before us. Looking at our wedding bands now nearly one year in, I feel like we picked the right ones. They've stood the test of time thus far. The fires that forged these rings, I imagine, were hot. The flames burned off the dross that contaminated the metal. Metalworkers divide the dross, waste and impurities in the mix, removing it as the metal is exposed to intense heat. If they left it in, the metal could be weaker, its shine, duller. Dross isn't meant to be part of the finished product. But even after all that work, wedding bands can still lose their shine: they get dirty. They pick up the grime of life in the real world, and even if you're washing your hands, the rings can start to look dull or scuffed up. They don't have to stay that way, though. We've taken our bands to the jewelers for professional cleaning, and they come back shining like new. Thanks to the quality of the metal and the work of the smith who crafted the rings, they should last, keeping their shine for all our life together.

What if you were made of living, breathing metal? How do you think you'd look after all the time that you've spent out in the real world? I think we'd all like to be bright and smooth and shiny, maybe even gleaming when the sun shined down on us. But the truth is that you're more likely to be scuffed up. You've got the grime of life on you, all those impurities dust that cling to you from the choices you've made and the things you've done. It's a gradual process. You don't notice it from day to day, but at some point down the line you might notice that layers of grime have built up and blended in with your metal, dulling you down. And even when you wash, you can't really get back to shining like you're meant to shine.

Jesus isn't a jeweler, and you're not metal; but even so, he has come to burn off your dross.

Today's Gospel text might sound a little strange coming from Jesus, especially as a lot of the world thinks of him. Here, he's saying he came to cast fire upon the earth. He says that he hasn't come to bring peace, but division – even amongst family members. What's the deal? This doesn't sound like the love-and-hugs kind of Savior that people have imagined Jesus to be. But this is exactly the Savior that you and I need.

Fire in the Bible is often associated as bringing one of two things: destruction or purification. Here, Jesus is indeed looking ahead to the cross, where he will take the full force of the destructive fire of God's wrath. That is the baptism that waits for him. Here, Jesus is emotionally torn: humanly speaking, he doesn't want to undergo the suffering that would lead him to the cross, the death that needs to take place to make atonement for our lives of imperfection. But he also urgently wishes to go to that baptism, precisely because it is what will bring us victory over sin and the power of death. Jesus goes ahead of us. He is destroyed by the fire of God's wrath against our flaws and failings, our sin, and he leaves us with the fire that would cleanse and refine us in a restored relationship with His Father and our Father, the One who crafted us in the first place.

So why is division a sign of the Church? If it's a marker of the attitudes and actions that reflect who we are and who we are called to be as the body of Christ, what kind of division did Jesus come to bring? To put it briefly, Jesus came to divide life from lies.

Something I'd heard recently remarked on two great lies that are being told in our culture right now – told so fervently and frequently that people are taking them for truth. The first is that “love = acceptance.” If you want to show love towards someone, it says, you have to accept them and their worldview; you can't disagree with them if you really love them. The second lie goes hand-in-hand with the first: if you don't agree with someone's position or what they find acceptable, then you must therefore hate them or fear them. Neither of these assertions are true! And yet, how much of today's interaction in the United States

just assumes those lies reflect reality? As Christians in America right now, you've been lied to again and again by a world that wants you to just blend in and fade away, rather than standing out as witnesses to Jesus' self-giving love and God's design for His creation.

Our times don't look too different from those of the prophet Jeremiah when people claim to speak for God but say something different than God has in His Word. Lying prophets offer people vain hope and false security instead of calling them to recognize the layers of grime and the infiltration of dross in their lives. Posing the same question that serpent used to tempt mankind to turn from God in the first place, they ask "Did God really say...?" in order to prompt people to look to themselves, to others – to anything other than God's Word – for an answer. Sin is at the root of the worst division in history, the separation of Creator and His created. Listening to the lies, you and I dive in to the grime.

Jesus came to bring division, but it doesn't look like what we might expect. His disciples aren't meant to cut themselves off from the rest of the world, living in isolation. The Church isn't a collection of people who are better than everyone else, acting in a condescending way or seated on thrones of judgment. Jesus calls us to be his people in the world. We are in the world, yet not of the world. You and I are sent out every day into the real world as witnesses both to our Savior and his design for life lived through his cross. We as the Church isn't called to imitate the culture around us, but to reach it.

When it comes down to it, there are only two worldviews, the one that belongs to the world or one which lives in Christ. And the world believes its own lie: it hates and rejects Jesus as God's Son because it can't reconcile with him. Living in a divided world as Jesus' disciples isn't easy. Persecution is a reality. In our reading from Hebrews 11-12, the conclusion of the "heroes of faith" chapter of this letter, we heard how the saints were persecuted in the ancient world for following Christ, even as they very much still are in our world today. Persecution isn't going to be going away, either, not until Jesus comes again. In this time in between, though, you and I can look to Jesus' enduring the cross for our sake. He is our strength and our encouragement, and nothing can take us from him.

Jesus' "baptism" under the fire of God's wrath on the cross makes possible the baptism into purified life that he gives us. Just last week, we heard that peace was another sign of the Church; but that peace that Jesus brings is peace with God, not with the world. Even in a world that rejects you, you can be an instrument of that peace. The source of the believer's life is fellowship with Christ. You and I are called to show love towards the world around us, even when we disagree with it – and especially when we disagree! Stand strong in God's Word, Christ's testimony of our Creator's loving design for His craftsmanship. Stand strong even when it gets hot, even when it gets difficult. Stand strong in the patience and steadfastness that the Holy Spirit brings, and show our world God's love.

Division for the Christian means not blending in, but standing out. It shouldn't come as a surprise to your friends and neighbors that you're a Christian – and I don't mean just that you go to worship on the weekend. Jesus has come to wash you and make you clean, to peel off your grime that clings so closely and polish off all the scuffing you've picked up. Fire-forged in his loving care, you can shine in the light that he brings into our world in the way you were meant to as God's beloved, the Church.

In Christ, you will stand the test of time

Amen.