

Division and Fire and Love
Sermon preached at St. Stephen's Episcopal Church
August 17, 2025
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Our Gospel text this morning is not exactly warm and fuzzy, is it? Jesus says, "I came to bring fire to the earth." And in case we think he just blowing off some steam, he clarifies, saying, "Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division!" On Friday morning, I admit, I scrolled around, looking for something easier for us this Sunday, with mixed results.

First story: In my email, there's an ad about the popular youth group curriculum, J2A. The publishers have finally reworked the material to be fully inclusive and LGBTQ+ friendly. Twenty years ago, I was a new priest overseeing four youth groups in a large parish in Tennessee. A mom came to me angry and frightened that this program and I would "teach her son to be gay." Keep in mind this was 2004, and Gene Robinson had recently been consecrated the Episcopal Church's first gay bishop. In our conversation, I talked her down, but I didn't **back** down. Explaining that no matter her son's orientation, I would support him and assure him of God's love, always. And I would support her in doing the same for him, because that's what love looks like.

This was a time of division and fire in the Episcopal Church, and it was a hard-fought journey from where we were, to where God would have us be. An open and inclusive church, finally. But on the way we managed to rip apart communities, dioceses, and churches. Not the easy path, or the peaceful path, but the right path - walking in the ways of Jesus.

"Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division!"

Given our divided country, divisive politics, and polarized culture, we understand division. We've experienced it in our communities, workplaces, and families. I know, it's easier to keep quiet, to hold a tentative peace. But sometimes there's more at stake, and we have to speak up, act out, and stand up for the ways of Jesus. Hopefully not with a two by four. But we do need to affirm the ways of Jesus clearly, and with love. In any way we can. Things are looking grim out there, no matter our politics. Those on the margins are suffering. The numbers of people coming to pick up meals at St Stephen's Table continue to increase. The regulars are now being joined by people who appear to be stopping by on their way home from work.

Second story: Our daughter Mackenzie works at 18 Degrees as a day care provider. 18 Degrees serves children and families who need support from the department of child and family services. Earlier this week, a mother of one of the children in Mackenzie's classroom had a meltdown in the director's office. The family's Snap benefits continue to be cut, and expenses are rising for her and her young sons. Mackenzie told this mom about St. Stephen's Table. Explaining that she can swing by after picking up her boys, and get "take-away" for the whole family. Good, free meals, easy to get, without judgment. She described the mom's amazement,

and relief. I was down in the kitchen on Thursday evening, so I don't know if this mom came by for meals. But I'm sure that knowing she has more support doesn't hurt. Might even help her feel less hopeless and overwhelmed. And that's good news.

Though to be honest - the best news would be a Pittsfield that doesn't need feeding programs, or housing shelters, or any of the many ways we're all trying to fill the gaps. The best news would be a Pittsfield in which there is **enough**: enough housing, enough health care, enough mental health care, enough food, enough compassion.

Friends, this can't be just a pipe dream. Consider the last line in our Gospel text. "You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present time?" It makes me cringe because I know what I see when I am willing to look. The signs of the present time are clear. We're stuck in this loop of fear and scarcity, and bullying others to deflect from our responsibility to love our neighbors fully.

Last story: As I looked for something upbeat to share, I took a quick dip into Facebook, and saw that a clergy friend had posted a picture of the Make Way for Ducklings ducks on the Common. Which made me smile. Until I saw her follow up pic, which was reposted from 2019. When artist Karyn Alzayer had wrapped the statues in foil blankets and erected cages around each, highlighting the way our country was treating immigrant children in 2019.¹

God forgive us - here we are again. A country made up of immigrants, built on immigrant and slave labor, prospering on land taken from indigenous people. And we've returned to blaming immigrants and the poor, to deflect from the real issues, and where the real solutions lie. Maybe the reckoning Jesus is describing in Luke's Gospel wouldn't be such a bad thing.

Remember, it's in Luke's Gospel that we hear Mary's song,² articulating the ways of God. The values Jesus was steeped in, and goes on to embody and share in his lifetime. God scatters the proud in their conceit, casts the mighty down from their thrones, and lifts up the lowly. God fills the hungry with good things, and sends the rich away empty. Throughout his life and ministry Jesus articulates **this** vision of the kingdom of God.

And Luke goes on in the book of Acts to detail stories of the earliest communities of Jesus followers, who live in the ways that Jesus taught them. They leave families and jobs, and their former lives, to create a new way of living. To pool resources, to share what they have with those in need. And to speak the truth to power, proclaiming the good news of Jesus. They walk in the way of Jesus, even as they live under an oppressive regime. I'm sure they read the sign of their times and realized that the way ahead would be difficult. Some would suffer and be persecuted, and there were so few of them - as they took on the power of the Roman Empire. And yet, they followed the way that Jesus showed them, with faith and perseverance.

What would that look like for us? How do we stand up, speak up, act up for Jesus in the face of the powers of our world? I think there are a variety of ways we respond, as we have different

gifts and capacities, and spheres of influence. But I think it starts with a fierce, radical, relentless love. Love God, love ourselves, and love our neighbors - relentlessly. Even now. Particularly now.

If we are going to walk in the ways of Jesus, and take on the brokenness of our world, it must come from a place of deep love. Not hate, or fear, or anger - but LOVE. At the core, that's what Jesus taught us - God loves this world with a deep and abiding love. We respond by loving God and one another. Because love is the only power strong enough to change the world to what God would have it be.

Let's close with a poem by Rosemerry Wahtola Trommer.
It's called, What Comes Next.³

Love relentlessly, she said,
and I want to slip these two words
into every cell in my body, not the sound
of the words, but the truth of them,
the vital, essential need for them,
until relentless love becomes
a cytoplasmic imperative,
the basic building block for every action.
Because anger makes a body clench.
Because fear invokes cowering, shrinking, shock.
I know the impulse to run, to turn fist, to hurt back.
I know, too, the warmth of cell-deep love—
how it spreads through the body like ocean wave,
how it doesn't erase anger and fear,
rather seeds itself somehow inside it,
so even as I contract love bids me to open
wide as a leaf that unfurls in spring
until fear is not all I feel.
Love relentlessly.
Even saying the words aloud invites
both softness and ferocity into the chest,
makes the heart throb with simultaneous
urgency and willingness. A radical pulsing
of love, pounding love, thumping love,
a rebellion of generous love,
tenacious love, a love so foundational
every step of what's next begins
and continues as an uprising,
upwelling, ongoing, infusion
of love, tide of love, honest love.

amen.

¹ <https://www.wgbh.org/news/local/2019-08-02/artist-cages-make-way-for-ducklings-statue-to-protest-child-detention-centers>

² the Magnificat, Luke 1:46-55

³ Rosemerry Wahtola Trommer, "What Comes Next," as posted on her blog, A Hundred Falling Veils, February 3, 2025. <https://ahundredfallingveils.com/>