

## “Creative Fire” (Luke 12:49-56)

Sermon August 19, 2007

The Reverend Elton O. Smith, Jr.

St. James' Episcopal Church, Potomac, MD

“Take our minds and think through them; take our mouths and speak through them; take our hearts and set them on fire!”

Every year, early in the summer, magazines and newspapers have special features and book review sections on “beach reading” — light books, both in content and in weight, that you can read and forget and even leave behind. I don't think today's bible passages qualify as “beach reading.” My oldest son's Presbyterian congregation in Darien, Connecticut moves their early Sunday morning service out to the beach in the summertime. I'll find out later if they used these passages today! They're pretty heavy for worship on the sand — unless you do what people do sometimes when they hear scripture they don't like or don't understand: they just pull down the sunshades of their minds.

But it's pretty hard to ignore the Gospel this morning. Jesus is sounding **very** impatient! This is certainly not a Sunday school “sweet Jesus” we are hearing. As the passage opens, Jesus is saying “I came to cast fire upon the earth; and would that it was already kindled! Do you think I have come to give peace on earth? No, I tell you, but rather division in every household!” Jesus seems pretty angry and frustrated, but how could he say that his **mission** was to “cast fire upon the earth?” Maybe it helps some to remember that Jesus was a very real human being, but even so, how can this passage be “Gospel” - Good News?

So I've been reflecting on this passage all week, because I know that the Gospel writers retained these portions of Jesus' life for some purpose. Jesus says that he “came to cast fire upon the earth.” Thinking about “*fire*” I remember my very real, dirty, and difficult time fighting fire in the Kootenai National Forest in northwest Montana during the last weeks of the summer between my freshman and sophomore college years. What we did, all day and into the night, day after day, was dig trenches **around** the perimeter of the fire to keep it from spreading. When we were successful, the fire was contained. It was toward the end of our summer commitment to the U.S. Forest Service, so after about ten days of this backbreaking work, the six of us from Missouri collected our pay and took the train back home.

I never really understood what that way of fighting fire would accomplish until I was in the Lassen National Park in northern California a few years ago. There I saw thousands

of acres of forest where fires decades before had destroyed mature trees. But now I could see what was happening decades later. The section of the forest where the fire had been contained was now being filled with new and vigorous growth. Then I recalled my Forest Service time digging trenches and understood the purpose of that back-breaking work we had done as college students so many years before. What we were doing is what one writer describes as “creative destruction.”

Those memories and my reflection on them have helped me to better understand Jesus’ words in the passage from the 12<sup>th</sup> chapter of the Gospel of Luke this morning. Jesus, whom we praise as the Prince of Peace, as the great healer and reconciler, is talking here about the fires that would bring divisions in families and even calling us hypocrites if we couldn’t understand that. These are harsh words: breaking down, bringing division, and causing disruption.

Then I happened to see a review of a recent book entitled *If It Ain’t Broken, Break It*, written by two corporate executives. They are challenging other corporate leaders to think beyond the typical traditional modes and attitudes to look at what in the workplace and society should probably be broken, and done away with.

What comes to your mind about what **needs** to be broken and burned in the world as we know it? What do you think needs to be changed? What needs to be seen with a new perspective? The authors of this book suggest that we live proactively and get rid of some things in order to create the possibility for change, improvement, and renewal.

I think there are plenty of things we shouldn’t take for granted anymore. I remember the character Noah in “Green Pastures,” who expresses a memorable sentiment in this play which was first produced in 1929, a year when American society suffered a big jolt. He says, “Everything that ain’t nailed down is coming loose.” Perhaps whatever is left in our 21st-century society of prejudice, parochialism, selfishness, and materialism should not be repaired or mended, but should instead be broken and destroyed. Do you agree?

So let me ask you, what in **your** life **needs** to be **broken** in order to be rebuilt or changed? Is there some attitude, some behavior, some mode of thinking, or some pattern of being in your life that needs to be broken or changed? We hear constantly that this is a changing world. Are we changing with it—for the better? Do we want to? The current political campaign with its usual harshness and cynicism is just one of the reasons that I wonder.

We need to turn upside-down and expose the ways that racial, ethnic, religious, social, and political prejudice are becoming so prevalent that ordinary people, not just night-time radio disc jockeys and TV cable commentators, don’t even try to hide or camouflage them. Those attitudes, which have been seen in the frightening violence in our schools in the last several years, must be broken and destroyed. We need to break the cycles of agony and pain, of prejudice and selfishness, and of greed and materialism, before they break us!

It's not just "Society" with a capital "S" that needs to be broken of its prejudices, hatreds, and atrocities. As good as we think we are, or think we try to be, there are those unconverted places in our own lives and hearts where such negative attitudes, mind-sets, and behaviors have so molded and guided us that we have just become accustomed to them.

I hope you remember my suggestion several weeks ago that some sermons are meant to comfort the disturbed, and some are meant to disturb the comfortable. It's clear that this one is in the latter category! In this morning's Gospel, Jesus, the one who was known to be a peacemaker, is saying that "if it's not broken, break it! Set fire to it!" Jesus is saying, "I can hardly wait to create new life and new ways of doing and thinking." And listen to the words of Jeremiah in our first lesson: "Is not my word like fire, says the Lord, and like a hammer which breaks the rock in pieces?"

We need to be reminded that God's word is *powerful* and has force to accomplish its end, just like *fire* or a hammer! Dorothy Sayers, a great English mystery writer of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and a great Christian intellectual, expressed this power of Jesus in these memorable words: "The people who hanged Christ never ....accused him of being a bore —on the contrary, they thought him too dynamic to be safe. It has been left to later generations....to efficiently pare the claws of the Lion of Judah, to certify him "meek and mild" and recommend him as a fitting household pet for pale curates and pious old ladies. To those who knew him, however, he in no way suggests a milk-and-water person; they objected to him as a dangerous *firebrand!*"

Dorothy Sayers' remarkable contemporary, C.S. Lewis, gave a similarly dramatic description of Christ's love as "Love as hard as nails" and "Love as fierce as fire." In those strong phrases Lewis captured the dynamic spirit of Jesus in the Gospel this morning.

But now, I ask you, is that spirit alive in our midst today? Dorothy Sayers concluded the powerful remarks I quoted by saying, "Perhaps the drama is played out now, and Jesus is safely dead and buried. Perhaps. It is ironical and entertaining to consider that at least once in the world's history those words might have been spoken with great conviction, *but that was upon the eve of the Resurrection.*"

This morning, we come here to worship as ***Resurrection Christians!*** Jesus is not dead, he is alive in our midst! In that reality, and with that conviction, we are called to pray in the name of the Risen Christ:"Take our minds and think through them; take our mouths and speak through them; ***take our hearts, and set them on fire!***"

***AMEN***