

Gracious God, take our minds and think through them;
take our hands and work through them;
take our hearts and set them on fire.
Amen.

The beginning of Luke's Gospel proclaims that Jesus will "guide our feet into the way of peace" (1:79). Near the end of the Gospel, the resurrected Jesus appears among his friends and offers a benediction of peace (24:36).¹

Within those bookends, how are we to understand Jesus' statement that he brings "fire to the earth (12:49), and division, not peace? How can the one who tells a parable of reconciliation between father and son, be the same one who sets parents against their children and children against their parents? In light of his own example, and the testimony of his preaching throughout the Gospel, what can Jesus' words of division possibly mean?

This is a question that theologians have struggled with for centuries. Some have used Jesus' words as a warrant for just-war theory in the face of very real clashes between and among nations – providing a "divine sanction" for their violence and struggles for power.

Others have seen in the juxtaposition of parent and child a description of the division that occurs between believers and unbelievers – setting a firm dichotomy of saved and unsaved.

¹ Much of this sermon is adapted from *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 3, Theological Perspective*.

And still others have suggested a symbolic interpretation, in which the parent-child conflict represents the division, within each of us ourselves, between the mind and our passions – as rational thought seeks to overpower the impulses of sin.

These various responses to the apparent contradiction between Jesus' declaration of division, on the one hand, and his overarching message of reconciliation and peace throughout the Gospel, on the other, show how difficult it is to pin down just one meaning – and it's not just that central theological message that is difficult to pin down, it's also the details.

For example, was the fire Jesus brought a baptism of fire like the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, burning in the hearts and upon the heads of believers – enflaming them to mighty deeds of faithfulness? Was it, rather, the refiner's fire, burning away the chaff of sin or the fruitless branches that don't bear fruit? Or was it the fire of judgement, raining down from heaven upon the heads of God's enemies?

It is easy to wander down these paths of theological pondering, chasing details until you realize you've ended up with your nose in a corner and no closer to God. And so perhaps the dilemmas and tensions in this passage cannot, and should not, be completely resolved.

Instead this passage may best understood in light of the totality of the gospel story, and in the interplay between the ways of God and the realities of human history. In that light, one could say the passage is *descriptive* rather than *prescriptive*.

That is, it is not Jesus' purpose to set children against their parents, or parents against their children, but that this sort of rupture can be the result of how Christ's presence in our lives changes us – when the old status quo is disrupted.

Remember the parable of the prodigal son? That is a story about reconciliation between a long estranged younger son and his father. Yet their reconciliation bears the seeds of rupture in relationship between the father and the older son – one that depended on an old status quo.

We do not always appreciate the great reversals found in the gospels. We don't like it when those we deem undeserving receive the abundant grace promised to all. We want others to be punished for their sins, while we expect to be welcomed into the embrace of God in eternal life. As the old saying goes, nobody expects to see their enemies in heaven.

But what these reversals teach us, what passages like today's can show us, is that God can't be put into a box and tamed for our purposes so that we can maintain our comfortable status quo.

God is not an epidural, numbing us to the complexity of life – God is a midwife, someone sitting next to us and saying push.²

There is pain in life, but we'll get through it – and God will be with us the whole way. And at the end, it won't be in vain – we will hold new life in our hands because of our faithfulness and willingness to be transformed.

That is the promise that is woven throughout the gospels – in stories of peace and reconciliation and in stories of division and fire: God is always calling us to new life in him, not always in the ways we expect or would prefer, but always abiding with us in love.

² http://www.theworkofthepeople.com/jesus-wept?utm_content=bufferb94e9&utm_source=buffer&utm_medium=facebook&utm_campaign=Buffero

The choice we face every day, and always, is whether we will accept this call into new life with God at the center, or will instead take shelter in the comfort in the status quo the world offers.

My prayer is that we may have boldness of faith to follow Christ with courage and perseverance.

~ Amen ~