

**Words on the Way: *Disturbing the Peace***

**Luke 12:49-56**

**Second Baptist Church, Memphis**

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From the 9<sup>th</sup> chapter of the Gospel of Luke all the way to the 19<sup>th</sup> chapter, Jesus is traveling. He is on the road. And he is on the road to Jerusalem. He is on the way to the climax of his life and ministry in Jerusalem.

Last week we started a series where we are going on a portion of that journey with Jesus. From chapter 12 – 15.

I decided to call this series “Words on the Way.” There really is no unifying theme to these passages. It is a hodgepodge of subjects. But all of these scripture passages have one thing in common: Jesus is talking. Jesus is always talking in all of these passages.

Lots of Jesus talking. And it seems to me that assuming Jesus knew where he was going and what was going to happen there, we might ought to pay attention to what he said along the way. Those might be important words on the way to Jerusalem.

Today Jesus’ words on the way are about peace.

I had big plans for Friday. It was one of those rare free and clear days. I was going to stay home Friday and work on this sermon. Maybe run or work out at the Y. But mostly just stay home and get a lot of work done preparing for this morning.

I did have to take Ivy to school Friday morning. Now that Sam is in Middle School, we have kids going to two different schools, and they start at different times. So Friday, Heidi took Sam to White Station Middle School at 7:15, and I took Ivy to Grahamwood Elementary at 8:15.

Still plenty of time to work on my sermon. Right across the street from Grahamwood is one of my favorite places. Bryant’s Breakfast. I love to go there by myself and eat breakfast and read the newspaper. I was right there. I hadn’t eaten breakfast. So, I went in.

I have to confess it was my third time to eat breakfast there this week. I happen to be in the area around breakfast time to drop off Ivy. You know it’s bad when Kerrie, who runs the place, just asks me if I want the usual. The usual is a bacon and egg biscuit and a plain biscuit with a Diet Coke. The *Diet* Coke makes it a balanced meal.

So I ate breakfast and read the paper. Then I remembered that I had an appointment at the eye doctor at 10:30. So by the time I got home from breakfast, I only had about an hour.

At the eye doctor, they asked me if I had time to get my eyes dilated. She said it would make me light sensitive and I’d have blurry vision for 3-4 hours. I said no, I had a lot of work to do.

I had my eye exam. I thought I was through. She told me to lean my head back and look up, and she put some drops in my eyes. They stung a little. I said, *What was that?*

She said, *Those were the dilation drops. It will take about 15 minutes for them to take effect. You might want to get a*

*magazine or something.* You can't undo dilation drops, so I was stuck. I waited 30 minutes for the doctor to come in and look in my eyes for 30 seconds and proclaim everything fine. I paid my bill and headed home. And sure enough for about the next three hours I couldn't see to read or write at all.

Also, during this time, we had painters working on the outside of our house, and I had someone come out to look at our air conditioner.

About the time I regained my sight, it was time to go pick Sam up from school. Since he starts an hour early, he gets out an hour early, of course.

Still hadn't gotten any work done.

A little while later Heidi came home from school with Ivy. When I got my eyes dilated, they gave me those cool plastic sunglasses. I knew Ivy would like those, so I put them on and showed them to her. She took them, put them on, and said, *Don't I look cool? Don't I look radical?*

I said, *I don't know about radical.*

She said, *What does radical mean?*

I'm pretty good with words. You know, I may not be able to change the oil in the car or change out a no good light switch, but when somebody around the house asks me what a word means, that's something I can usually handle. But I went blank with "radical." That's kind of hard to define to an eight year old.

Radical. As I thought about what that word means for a few seconds, all I could think about, I mean *all* I could think about, was Jesus' words in our scripture today. Those words that I was supposed to be studying, preparing a sermon about. Radical.

*I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! <sup>50</sup>I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what stress I am under until it is completed! <sup>51</sup>Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division! <sup>52</sup>From now on five in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three; <sup>53</sup>they will be divided: father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law."*

I couldn't define "radical" for Ivy. I could only think of Jesus' words and how if anything is radical, those words are.

When Jesus initially called his disciples, it was a simple invitation: *Come, follow me. And I will make you fish for people.* It sounded nice, pleasant, even.

But now it's getting serious. Now Jesus is on the way to Jerusalem. Now he is saying, *Do you understand what you have gotten yourself into? This is serious business. If you're going to go with me, I need you to undergo a radical reorientation of how you look at your life.*

So Jesus says, *I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled!*

Sounds scary. Fire. Fire can be bad or good, useful or destructive, but it is always powerful. Fire can't be ignored.

It was fire that Moses saw in a bush and fire that led the people by night through the wilderness. It was fire that touched the lips of the prophet Isaiah as he was called to proclaim God to Israel and fire that fell upon and consumed the Alter of Baal when Elijah prayed.

*Is not my word like fire, says the LORD,  
and like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces?*

It was tongues of fire that descended upon all those gathered at Pentecost.

Fire does many things. It burns up, it destroys, but it does something else, too, doesn't it?

Think of a forest fire. Among scientists and others who are interested in forests, especially our national parks, there is a debate about forest fires. Of course, there is an emphasis from many to prevent all forest fires, in order to save our forests. But there are those scientists who advocate the benefits and, in fact, the necessity of forest fires. Let them burn, they say.

The problem is that because we have prevented forest fires for so long, now when a fire does occur, it does much more damage. There was a time, though, say 100 years ago, when our forests were fire-tolerant.

When our forests were in fire-tolerant, frequent forest ground fires (usually caused by lightning) cleansed the forest and reduced the combustible fuel load on the forest floor. Native

Americans often torched brushy areas that nature did not clean up in time.

These natural fires periodically burned the brush, debris, and excessive numbers of small trees. This was mother nature's way of cleaning house—without burning down the house.

Anyone who walks through an old-growth forest can see the burn marks on the lower trunks of many big trees as evidence that the natural fires of long ago seldom reached the lower limbs of big trees which would cause them to ignite and in turn create a true fire storm that incinerates everything else in the forest. Unfortunately, a fire storm is what usually happens today in forest fires during summertime.

Many scientists argue now that very few natural fires can occur today because most of our forests are not in equilibrium. The reason is that humans stopped most natural forest fires a hundred years ago. Incendiary conditions now prevail because of decades of accumulated brush, debris, and thickets of small trees on the forest floors.

So all of that undergrowth becomes an unnatural fuel load that creates intensely hot forest fires that ignite the big trees and destroy every living thing in the forest. Massive amounts of precious topsoil are then washed away from hillsides by rains before new root structure can save it.

But for thousands of years, fires in forests have always been important. And by stopping all forest fires, we have created problems. Without fire the lodgepole pine does not effectively reproduce, without fire the undergrowth chokes out new seedlings, without fire the forest is not renewed.

And so some scientists will talk about the forest fire cycle. Perhaps every fifty years there needs to be a big one for the long term health of the forest. One big enough to regenerate vast regions of old forest. One significant enough to do all that needs to be done to renew the earth upon which it burns.

Fire: it can cook our food or burn it beyond recognition.

Fire can warm us or destroy us.

Fire can mean many things, it can do many things, but fire cannot be ignored.

*I have come to bring fire on the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled.*

Jesus was ready to bring fire upon the earth. It sounds like a bad thing, an unkind thing, a not very gracious thing. But it calls to mind the whole question of discerning one thing from another, of dividing good from bad, the eternal from the temporal.

*[thanks to Richard J. Fairchild, Sermon-Lectionary Resources]*

Fire to burn off the impure.

Fire to burn off the unnecessary.

Fire to burn off the trivial.

Fire to prepare the soil for new growth.

Fire to clear away the undergrowth—all that unnecessary stuff—that chokes out new life.

Fire to renew our hearts and minds and lives.

Fire is on the edge of life and death, renewal and destruction. It's dangerous. Jesus came to bring a radical and powerful fire.

And so it begins to make a little more sense when Jesus goes on to say:

*<sup>51</sup>Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division! <sup>52</sup>From now on five in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three; <sup>53</sup>they will be divided: father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law."*

Now this is a challenging, radical statement. Jesus did not come to bring peace but division. And we are trying to reconcile that with the Jesus we know as the Prince of Peace, the Jesus who breathes the peace of God into the hearts of those who follow him, the Jesus who says, *Blessed are the peacemakers.*

How can it make any sense for Jesus to say that he has not come to bring peace to the earth?

Maybe it has something to do with the state of the earth or how we see the world. If the world were a place of nothing but great beauty and goodness, life and justice and happiness flourishing for all of God's children, then Jesus' radical statement about not bringing peace would be deeply troubling. It wouldn't make any sense. Why would Jesus disturb a peace like that?

But if, on the other hand, our world is not a place of justice and life for all of God's children, if, in fact, our world is marred and deeply scarred, if it deals death and injustice for many of God's children, if it is full of systems that exploit and oppress much of God's creation and many of God's people, if I am

having the air conditioning repair man come to my house on Friday because while it is keeping me cool in the 100 degree heat my unit is making a loud noise that is annoying me, while an old woman living in a shack in another part of town whose air conditioner makes no noise at all because she doesn't have one at all is literally dying from the heat, if our world is, in fact, full of injustice for many of God's people, then what Jesus said about not bringing peace begins to make sense.

There are many things in our world that need to be disturbed—confronted and shattered and burned off by fire. Jesus comes not to disturb the peace of God in a just and perfect world but to disturb a false and superficial peace that accepts and ignores the death dealing ways and injustice and brokenness of our world.

I mean what kind of a son of God would Jesus be, really, if he didn't come to disturb the peace of this world that we live in? Any Messiah worth his salt, when he came to this world, would bring fire to burn off and to renew.

I heard a guy say one time that one thing he learned from the Quakers was how seriously and determinedly they attacked moral and social problems in the world. Of course it was Quakers who really led the way in attacking slavery, for example, years ago. This man said, talking about the Quakers, *They work for peace, and if you really want to cause conflict, work for peace.*

I read this week about a woman named Lisa Fithian who is something like a professional protestor. I don't even know what all the causes are that she protests, but she goes around the world protesting corporations and government powers,

trying to get their attention about certain practices. She's been arrested thirty times.

What caught my attention was not her cause but something she said in an interview: *When people ask me, 'What do you do?,' I say I create crisis, because crisis is that edge where change is possible.*

I wonder: Is this not what Jesus meant when he spoke of bringing fire to the earth— of not bringing peace? Did he not seek to bring crisis as *that edge where change is possible*? Was he not saying, perhaps, *I have come not to bring peace but to bring crisis, because business as usual means injustice and death?*

[*"Disturbing the Peace," Teresa Berger, The Christian Century, August 10, 2004, p.18.*]

Poet Harry Guest wrote "The Cleansing" for Palm Sunday 1995. This poem imagines the startled reaction of a bystander when Jesus overturns the tables of the money-changers.

### **The Cleansing**

A pallid spring sun shone on the forecourt. Inside the building it was dim and stuffy and people came and went about their business.

Suddenly we saw light gather to itself. A human shape, fused from another April, entered our temple like a shaft of fire.

The shadows burned away. Stark radiance pushing from floor to rafters dazzled the traders.

The man made all of light hurled trestles down so the money rolled glittering, smashed wicker cages so the captive doves flew whirring through blue clouds of incense.

He swept like a meteor with scourge and flame condemning us who'd turned the place for prayer into a space for robbery and bargaining.

He left, and it was as though the day had been withdrawn. We stared at the wreckage in the new noon dusk the shattered furniture, the litter of tarnished coins.

Someone said, 'Who was that?' There was a frightened pause. Another answered. 'He's called the Prince of Peace.'

Maybe the Prince of Peace needs to disturb the peace in your life. Jesus came to bring real peace, and in doing so sometimes he creates crisis. Crisis is that edge where real change is possible.

Maybe the Prince of Peace needs to bring a cleansing fire. He said he would.

Fire to burn off the impure.

Fire to burn off the unnecessary.

Fire to burn off the trivial.

Fire to prepare the soil for new growth.

Fire to clear away the undergrowth—all that unnecessary stuff— that chokes out new life.

Fire to renew our hearts and minds and lives.

Maybe, even, the Prince of Peace would call on us to disturb the peace in a world that surely God is not satisfied with.

I've always heard people say, No justice, no peace. I think I know what they mean.