August 18, 2013 – 13th Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 15)

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Today's Gospel is not an easy one to hear. This is not the Gentle Jesus Meek and Mild that we're used to hearing about. This is Jesus the prophet, using strong, uncompromising, almost martial language. Like the prophets of the Old Testament and John the Baptist, Jesus isn't trying to make us comfortable here. In fact, just the opposite!

This passage is divided into two sections, which isn't exactly clear by the way the RCL divided up the text. The first part is directed at the disciples, and specifically Peter. Jesus starts by echoing John the Baptist's prophecy about being the one who will baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire.

The Greek word for fire is *pur*, from which we get the word pyre, but from which we also get the word purify. In the Bible, fire is certainly used as a destructive force, as in the fire James and John wanted to call down on the inhospitable towns or the fire that consumed Sodom and Gomorrah, and of course fire plays a big part in the book of Acts, at the feast of Pentecost. But fire in the Bible often also has the connotation of purification or refining.

Jesus talks here with a certain amount of urgency. "How I wish that fire were already kindled," he says and then goes on to talk about his own baptism by fire, which he is heading to Jerusalem to face. As a matter of fact, ever since he set his face toward Jerusalem in Chapter 9, that urgency has been ever increasing, and is further underscored when he describes the stress he is under until this final task is completed.

This isn't the kind of stress that we normally think of, like if you have too many things to do in too short a time. The word Luke uses here is *synechomai*, which means to press together on every side, to hold fast, or to urge or impel. It's more like a burning need to press on with something because the all-important goal is in sight. A silly example that came to my mind is in the Wizard of Oz, where Dorothy and her friends see the Emerald City for the first time and can't help but start to run because they are so eager to get there.

For Jesus, the goal is indeed in sight and his need to press onward is great, but he also knows that it entails his own death.

Next, Jesus, at his most prophetic, tells Peter and the disciples if they think he has come to bring peace, they have another thing coming. In fact, he tells them, he is coming to bring division. The word for division here is *diamerismón*, which means breaking up, discord, or hostility. This is the only occurrence of this word as a noun in the New Testament, and you know when Luke hauls out a new and unique word that he means it to be important.

The verb form of this word, *diameridzo*, is actually used a lot in all of the Gospels, usually meaning merely to divide something up. For example, when the Romans divide Jesus's clothes among them at the crucifixion; or in Acts, when the tongues of fire divide themselves among the disciples at Pentecost; or again in Acts, when all of the believers in Jerusalem sell their belongings and divide the proceeds up among them. As a verb, it's a pretty innocuous word, but when Jesus uses it as a noun here it has a much more forceful meaning.

He goes on to be specific about this division. Households will be torn apart, and in a household of five it will be three against two or two against three – no one will be neutral. That's important – no one is neutral when it comes to following Jesus – either you are or you aren't.

And the closest relationships in the family unit will turn against each other:

"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."

In the first century Middle East, and in Rome, family was the most important of all affiliations, and Jesus is predicting its disruption because of him. And when he talks about the household, he uses the word, *oiko,* which can mean the building that houses a family, but not just that. It also means family, lineage, or even nation, as in the House of David.

So Jesus is predicting that everything that is most basic and important to his disciples' lives as they know it will be broken apart because of him. It's a pretty shocking and frightening prophesy!

He then turns to the crowds, in the second section of this passage, and berates them for being able to accurately forecast the weather, based on clouds and wind, but not able to understand what his presence on earth means. I don't know about you, but that one hit a little close to home, since we here in the Midwest pride ourselves on our weather sense.

In the Gospels, there's often a distinction made between Jesus' true followers – either the twelve apostles, or the slightly larger groups of disciples found here and there in Luke – and the large crowds who are just there to see the show, and who make demands on Jesus without offering anything of themselves in return.

It's this latter group that Jesus is speaking to here. He's not complaining that they can accurately predict the weather, but rather that they are so focused on the concerns and needs of their farms or their businesses that they are blind to the world-changing events that are happening right in front of them. It's this preoccupation with the world that is the wedge that will bring about the division that Jesus predicts.

Fast forward to today. What do a small group of no-doubt confused disciples and a crowd of weather-wise but otherwise clueless farmers have to do with us today? Are OUR families and households going to be divided? If so, how can we prevent it? And SHOULD we prevent it?

Our modern world today is not so different from first century Palestine, really. Oh sure, we have Doppler radar to predict our weather now, but that doesn't keep us from being preoccupied with it. And division is certainly happening all around us – internationally, nationally, and even all the way down to individual families.

But the kind of division Jesus is talking about here is something that HE'S bringing, not something we're doing to ourselves. This should be something that we want, right?

I wonder, sometimes. Just how far are we willing to go, to be a follower of Christ? Are we willing to take God's side against the world, even when the world has more people on its side? Are we willing to take a stand for social justice and equality, even if it means ostracism or perhaps even putting ourselves in danger?

The peace that Jesus says he's replacing with division is NOT the Shalom of God – the peace that passes all understanding. The peace he's talking about in this passage is the false peace of complacency. It's the false peace of personal comfort and worldly success. It's the false peace of the status quo. It's the false peace of the way we've always done things.

But Jesus tells us that that's not good enough. To follow him, we have to be willing to walk away from the world, and everything in it, including comfort and stability. We have to be able to pick up our cross and follow him to Calvary, knowing that we are leaving our lives behind. We have to be a disciple, not an observer; one of the twelve, not one of the crowd.

It's not easy, this life of Christ, but few things that are really worthwhile doing are. And never forget that we're not alone. We have each other – all the members of the Body of Christ, past, present, and future – holding each other up in constant prayer, and joining hands whenever we celebrate the Eucharist. We have the Holy Spirit to give us strength and courage. And we have Jesus, himself, as our template and guide. One of my favorite hymns is *St. Patrick's Breastplate*, and this is one of my favorite verses:

Christ be with me, Christ within me,

Christ behind me, Christ before me,

Christ beside me, Christ to win me,

Christ to comfort and restore me.

Christ beneath me, Christ above me,

Christ in quiet, Christ in danger,

Christ in hearts of all that love me,

Christ in mouth of friend and stranger.

Are we willing to walk into the refining fire? Because it's only then that we will find the true peace of God.