

Pentecost C13
August 14, 2016
“The Fire Jesus Brings”
Central Presbyterian Church, Montclair
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Isaiah 5:1-7

5 Let me sing for my beloved my love-song concerning his vineyard: My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill. 2 He dug it and cleared it of stones, and planted it with choice vines; he built a watchtower in the midst of it, and hewed out a wine vat in it; he expected it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes. 3 And now, inhabitants of Jerusalem and people of Judah, judge between me and my vineyard. 4 What more was there to do for my vineyard that I have not done in it? When I expected it to yield grapes, why did it yield wild grapes? 5 And now I will tell you what I will do to my vineyard. I will remove its hedge, and it shall be devoured; I will break down its wall, and it shall be trampled down. 6 I will make it a waste; it shall not be pruned or hoed, and it shall be overgrown with briars and thorns; I will also command the clouds that they rain no rain upon it. 7 For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel, and the people of Judah are his pleasant planting; he expected justice, but saw bloodshed; righteousness, but heard a cry!

Luke 12:49-56

49 “I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! 50 I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what stress I am under until it is completed! 51 Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division! 52 From now on five in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three; 53 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.”

54 He also said to the crowds, “When you see a cloud rising in the west, you immediately say, ‘It is going to rain’; and so it happens. 55 And when you see the south wind blowing, you say, ‘There will be scorching heat’; and it happens. 56 You hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present time?”

Jesus is bringing fire!

That’s exactly what John the Baptist anticipated. “I baptize you with water for repentance,” he declared, “but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.” (Matthew 3.11)

It all started long ago when Isaiah described us as a vineyard, carefully planted and lovingly nurtured by God to produce good fruit. God’s love and grace loosened the soil so we could grow deep roots in our relationship with God. Over and over God not only promised to be faithful and reliable, but delivered on those promises- protecting our ancestors with a pillar of fire when they escaped from Pharaoh’s hardness of heart. With the commandments and the law given in the midst of thunder and lightning on Mt. Sinai, God offered everyone a chance for more civilized relationships with others and a healthier relationship with creation. God did everything possible to cultivate us for wholesome, right relationships- for good fruit.

But in Isaiah’s day our people bowed down to worship other gods, and justice suffered. Poor and marginalized people were hurt. Our forebears became separated from God, at odds with

each other, unaware of the gift of creation. The good fruit God expected from them had soured into broken and damaged relationships in every direction. Isaiah declared it. And in a later day Jesus backed him up. He was on his way to Jerusalem where he would die, and he blurted out how he wished people could see the kingdom of God and join him in it. Right relationships, just relationships—that's what he wanted, too.

This past week the US Justice Department released a report that described systemic and stunning brokenness in the Baltimore police department and the community. African Americans are disproportionately stopped and searched, sometimes over and over. Juveniles and the mentally ill are treated with excessive force. The "pattern of making unconstitutional stops, searches and arrests arises from (its) longstanding reliance on 'zero tolerance' street enforcement, which encourages officers to make large numbers of stops, searches and arrests for minor, highly discretionary offenses," the report said. This strategy, not developed by police officers we should say, but by their supervisors, gradually came to be enforced almost exclusively in minority neighborhoods while the same minor offenses were tolerated in white neighborhoods. (riding bikes on sidewalks, panhandling, even just walking in the wrong direction)

And how about our politics this election year? I'm shocked how often I hear commentaries that denigrate and demean, that are meant to damage and disrupt. I'm stunned how often people will lie in order to protect their power. I saw some graphs from Pew Research that show how we have gradually divided ourselves over the last 30 years as we become a nation of mostly urban Democrats and rural Republicans. And Christians in each group don't understand how someone could call themselves Christian and belong to the other side.

My hometown exhibited this polarization as it gathered steam in the 1980's. I was a seminary student then and one summer day when I was visiting my mother in western Pennsylvania, the doorbell rang and it was a couple who were friends and neighbors of my parents. They had heard I was attending Princeton Seminary and they had come to visit me. They said the seminary I was attending was liberal and unChristian. It did not teach the gospel and I was jeopardizing my relationship with God and disqualifying myself from meaningful ministry if I continued to study there. I couldn't believe what neighbors could say.

I think I've told you before, that my little hometown 30 miles north of Pittsburgh has 7 Presbyterian churches in it. I like to call that part of the country "Presbyterian heaven." But really, that many Presbyterian congregations in a town of 18,000 people also means they can't live together under one roof- they have an immature sense of God's expectations for them. They have not borne good fruit. By the way, another Presbyterian church has been started there on Main Street.

My hometown needs the fire Jesus brings- the fire that burns away stubborn pride and installs humility and hospitality. Jesus wants to know if we recognize this time in which we live. Do we see the kingdom of God coming close to us in him?

The fire Jesus uses to baptize us cleanses us, burns away the impurities that corrupt our relationships so we can start over. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength, Jesus said, and your neighbor as yourself.

On our youth mission trip a week ago we spent an hour each evening talking and worshipping. It was a chance to let that fire work in us, clearing out a bigger space for God to inhabit in our lives. We learned to do a breath prayer that we can say throughout each day to remind us that we are God's people with a purpose.

And the fire Jesus uses to baptize us not only cleanses us but it inspires us, fills us, moves us. On Pentecost, the fire of Jesus' Spirit moved the disciples into the streets of Jerusalem to preach and throughout the Empire to make disciples, even as they risked their lives.

I feel as though the topic of our scripture readings today is the completion of some readings we heard two weeks ago. Then, we heard that God is pleased to give us the kingdom. That's the grace of God. When we say yes to the gift of Jesus Christ, the door to the kingdom opens. We don't have to prove our worthiness or earn God's love, God just gives the kingdom. This is the indicative of faith, what is, just because it is.

But both our scripture readings for today move on to the imperative. What are we "kingdom receivers" going to do with it, Jesus asks? And Isaiah is even more direct, using the same word three times. He says, God expects, God expects justice, the justice found in right relationships with God and others and ourselves and creation that creates a new community.

We Presbyterians, coming from the Reformed tradition, rightly emphasize the grace of God, the gift of the kingdom. "Grace alone," we say. But God expects a reply. Jesus wants us to embrace the kingdom through the justice found in strong relationships with God and the poor.

Over the past month I've been waiting to see if either of the two major party presidential nominees will say anything about the poor. And so far there hasn't been much. I think they can't because there are other groups, like the wealthy and the middle class who would complain and jeopardize the candidates' chances. To do what God wants is to take a risk.

Ironically, when we build relationships as God asks us to do, we risk some other relationships because people won't accept our priorities.

Last winter I saw the movie "Concussion" starring Will Smith. He played a doctor in Pittsburgh who discovered that the violent hits in football games were causing brain damage that could not be reversed. He cared about the victims of these brain injuries when no one else did. And he spoke out about it. He lost friends and was persecuted for his work. His life was threatened.

He had to move his family out to the west coast to start a new practice and a new life. But if the movie is to be believed, he is satisfied.

Jesus wants us to be fired up. Eager to love God and those whom God loves even when it means we will hurt as a result. It takes courage to respond to God's love, to follow in Jesus steps. One of the great things about the church is that we gather together to hear God's will, be encouraged to follow it, and be sent out to do it. And then, to come back to be loved and assured and enabled and fired up again. There is joy in this work. There is joy and satisfaction in the kingdom.

Jesus brings fire for us, for the world, for the kingdom.