

**Luke 12:49-56**  
**August 18, 2019**  
**20<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time**  
**The Rev. Dr. Mark W. Jennings**

We all have bad days, right? Days that we probably shouldn't have gotten out of bed. Days when we are cranky, when everything that someone else says or does just rubs us the wrong way. Maybe Jesus is having one of those days. It feels like Jesus is having a terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day. "I have come to bring fire to the earth, and oh how I wish it were blazing already! Do you think I have come to bring peace to the earth? No! I've come for division!" That's not what we want to hear from Jesus, do we? Where does that anger come from? Is Jesus allowed to be angry? What happened to our gentle, Jesus meek and mild? This Jesus is angry and intimidating. This is one of those passages that as a preacher I wish didn't turn up in the lectionary or that I could find another passage to preach on. This Jesus is a hard sell. Aren't we supposed to make Jesus attractive to people so that they will want to follow him? I thought we were beyond the hell fire and brimstone stuff, trying to scare people into the kingdom of God. We did not talk about these verses during Vacation Bible School, this is not the Jesus we wanted the kids to know. Our theme this year was that God is good. No matter what is happening in your life, whether times are tough, or things are changing, or even if things are smooth and easy, we can always depend on God's goodness and God's love. But can we? This seems to talk about God's anger. Does God get angry? What do you think? Doesn't the Bible speak of God's wrath, of God getting angry and zapping people? Or are we doing what theologians call "anthropomorphizing" God? That means that we are assuming human emotions and characteristics on the divine nature. When something bad happens, humans can often assume that God is angry with us? But is that true? Or is God so far above us that it is presumptuous of us to think that we know what is going on in the mind of God?

Many of you will remember a book from your childhood by C.S. Lewis called *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*. In that novel, four British siblings enter a coat closet and discover a whole other world

called Narnia. This magical world is filled with talking animals and the *original* Lion King, a lion named Aslan, who rules over all of Narnia. The youngest child Lucy strikes up a conversation with Mr. Beaver, asking about Aslan, “is he quite safe?” to which Mr. Beaver replies, “Safe?...Who said anything about safe? 'Course he isn't safe. But he's good.”<sup>1</sup>

Of course God isn't safe, but God is *good*. What God does may at times feel scary to us, but we trust in the goodness of God.

But what about Jesus? Obviously he gets angry, right? Jesus is human as well as divine. For him to be truly human, he must have human emotions, including anger. But isn't it sinful to be angry—we claim that Jesus was sinless, what about being angry. I guess what I've always believed is that emotions are not good or evil, righteous or sinful, they just are. Emotions are morally neutral. What we do with them, how we direct them, how we act on them may be constructive or destructive. Think about anger. Many parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles understand the anger that can come in the midst of real love. One of my friends said to me, “Before I had kids, I never knew I could love so much, or that any one person could make me *so angry*.” Loving parents know the unique heartache and rage that bubbles up when a beloved child becomes enchanted by or entangled in things that lead to their child's grief or harm. Those of you who are parents, is there anyone you love more than your kids? Is there anyone who can make you angry more than your kids? Anger is the emotion that arises when something you care about very much is threatened, or needs to change, and anger is nature's way of giving us the energy to effect change. Do we get angry with a person? Or with what that person does or says? When we are angry with our spouse or our child or a friend that we love dearly, do we say “I'm so mad at you! I wish you were out of my life?” Or do we say, “What happened really made me angry. Those words hurt me. That situation upset me, can we please talk about it?” I hope we do more of the latter than the former. You may have things that make you angry, but are you angry at the person or at the situation? You might get angry at the president, but is it at him or the actions you don't agree with? You might

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1 Feldmeyer, Meghan. “Strange Fire.” Sermon from Duke University Chapel, August 18, 2013.

feel Democrats are idiots and hate this country, but do they? Or do they just see things differently than you and you don't understand their actions. I bet you even know some Democrats and even like some of them.

I think that's what Jesus is doing. He's angry with what some of the people have done, that they have put their religious beliefs before caring for the poor; that they have cared more about their own security rather than the safety of all people. He loves them, even if he is angry with what they have done.

But then Jesus also warns us in this passage that because he has come will sometimes make it worse.

But wait a minute. Jesus is supposed to be the Prince of Peace. When Zechariah speaks of his son, John the Baptist early in Luke, he says that he will “guide our feet in the way of peace.” Remember these? Mine said “peace.” Following Jesus is supposed to bring us peace, not division. When we follow Jesus it means that anger disappears from our lives doesn't it? Well, no. Think about it. When you get together with friends, when you are at a gathering at work, what is one of the topics you avoid? Religion, right? Do you go up to strangers and say, “What church do you go to? Do you believe in Jesus? What is God doing in your life?” Probably not. Because faith is at the core of who we are as human beings and so it is a very touchy subject. And when it does come up, we don't always agree with each other, because we each have different experiences of God. Like the old joke about the two people who are marooned on a desert island, so they decide to build three churches. “You go to yours, I'll go to mine, and we'll both boycott that church up on the hill.”

Eventually God will bring us together, we will realize that what we have in common is greater than the things that we disagree about or that make us angry. When we really begin to realize that God loves that person that really ticks me off just as much as God loves me, it begins to change my attitude.

There's the old story of a woman who visits a silversmith. She asks him how he knows when the silver is refined, when it is pure. The silversmith responds, “when I can see my face in the silver.”<sup>2</sup>

God is the refiner, the silversmith, carefully holding his gaze on each of us as he refines what is

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2 Feldmeyer, Meghan. “Strange Fire.” Sermon from Duke University Chapel, August 18, 2013.

precious to him until it reflects his own image back to him. It may feel like fire to us, and it may feel like God might be angry with us, but it really means that God is not giving up on us until we become what he made us to be. Because he sees the face of Christ in each one of us. Maybe if we begin to see the face of Christ in one another—even when we are angry—we will learn to walk in the way of love rather than division trusting that somehow God hold us all.