

**“Playing with Fire”**  
**Isaiah 5:1-7, Luke 12:49-56**  
**August 14, 2016**  
**The Rev. Dr. Mark W. Jennings**

Did you listen to your parents when you were young? When they told you not to play with matches, did you think to yourself, “Of course not,” or did you secretly think, “I wonder what it is about matches that is so special? Hmmm . . .” Did you listen when they told you not to touch the top of the stove because it was hot, or did you reach your hand up there because you had to see for yourself? Did you listen to your parents? Of course you did. But if you did, what in the world are you doing here? If you were a good little boy or girl who always did what was safe, why in the world would you come to church? If you're looking for a safe place, this is not the place to be!

So often we think of Jesus as the one who is loving, accepting of all, ready to embrace, encourage and equip us to face whatever trials await us outside the wall of the church. And all that is true—if we listen to only part of what Jesus says. Yes, he came to take us too himself, to love and care, but did you hear his words today that Lee read? “I came to bring fire, and how I wish it were already kindled? Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division!” Now that's not what I want to hear. That's not the message you want to hear in church, is it? We have enough division outside these walls—in society, in politics, sometimes in our families or our jobs. A message of division is not what we are looking for. When Isaiah says that he expects justice but gets bloodshed instead or righteousness and instead gets an outcry, that's not the message I want to preach either. This is one of those situations when the words of Jesus are uncomfortable, challenging, upsetting. I've always thought that you should leave church feeling uplifted, encouraged, enlightened perhaps. You should leave church feeling that you were glad you came, don't you think? Except sometimes. Sometimes you should leave church feeling upset. You should be challenged. You can even be angry. You can leave wishing you had never come. Maybe today will be a day like that. But maybe we

shouldn't be surprised by days like that in church. Annie Dillard, the author of "Pilgrim at Tinker Creek," says: "On the whole, I do not find Christians, outside of the catacombs, sufficiently sensible of conditions. Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping god may wake someday and take offense, or the waking god may draw us out to where we can never return. "<sup>1</sup>

You might feel like that today. These can be upsetting scripture readings. In the reading from Luke, Jesus is looking ahead to the trouble he is about to face in Jerusalem and realizing that although in the long view, he has come to draw all people to himself, to bring life abundant, to be the Prince of Peace, in the short term there is trouble on the horizon. The early years were times in which it was difficult to be a Christian. If one was a Jew and a follower of Jesus there could be ostracism from Jewish society and even within one's own family. As Isaiah spoke of the vineyard that was God's people, if it did not bear fruit it would be plowed under. That's hard. If you follow God faithfully, it causes division. If you don't follow God faithfully, it causes trouble. No wonder one of the other prophets refers to God's spirit as a "refiner's fire." No wonder John the Baptist came warning of one who "is greater than I. I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire." These are hardly comforting words! But there were some there that day to hear the words of Jesus who were in Rome thirty years later. Late in the night on the 18<sup>th</sup> of July in the year 64 AD a fire began. This fire began in the area of the Circus Maximus and because the night was windy, it quickly spread along the whole length of the the Circus, and through narrow, twisting streets and close built apartment blocks. This cramped area of Rome had no open parks or temples to slow the fire, so it continued to burn and it burned not only through the night but for the next six days. The emperor Nero, who some source say

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1 Dillard, Annie. *Teaching a Stone to Talk*. 1982

watched the fire and played the lute while the city burned, but other say was not even in the city, had to fight rumors that he had planned the fire to clear out an area for his new palace. To deflect those rumors, he blamed the fire on a group of people that were annoying to him and that no one liked anyway, this new religious group, the Christians. In the aftermath Nero had many Christians put to death, some by the sword in the Colloseum, some were crucified on the roads leading up to the city, and some were burned to death. It was costly in those days to be Christian. It wasn't safe. Is it today? When I was a boy one of my favorite books that I read over and over again was "The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe," by C.S. Lewis, four British siblings enter a coat closet and discover a whole other world called Narnia. This magical world is filled with talking animals and they soon discover that the animals are waiting for the appearance of their ruler, the Son of the Emperor-over-Sea, named Aslan. The youngest of the children, Lucy, wants to know more about Aslan and in a conversation with Mr. Beaver, she is shocked to discover that Aslan is a true king of beasts, a Lion. "Oh," says Lucy, "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>2</sup> That's Jesus, not safe, but good. Maybe that's what church should be also, not always safe but good.

It cost those early Christians, it wasn't safe to be Christian in those early centuries. There are places still that we know that it isn't easy or safe to be a disciple of Jesus Christ. What about us? Does it cost us to be Christian? Does it cost us anything to be at church? A little time on Sundays, a little gas to drive here, a little patience to sit through a sermon, but what does it really cost us? What kind of field has God planted here in this church and are we bearing fruit? Is it hard for us to be disciples, does it cause upset or division in our lives if we are bearing true fruit for God? What does it cost you to be part of the First Presbyterian Church of Richland? A little money, right? We ask you to support the work of the church, to keep the lights on and pay the salaries, to keep the building in repair, to keep the church going. A little money, a little time, a little energy. Is that all it costs? Is that all you have to

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<sup>2</sup> Lewis, C.S. *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*.

give? What about your grudges, can you give those? Those little secret thoughts and judgments that you savor every once in while. Can you let go of those? Can you forgive, what if you are called to give that—your forgiveness? That person who hurt you, the one that you haven't seen in all these years because it's just hurts too much to remember what they did to you—maybe you have to give your pardon, your forgiveness. What about our prejudices, can we give those up? All those times we assume something about someone because of their background or their looks or their faith or their language or something else, can we give those? What about our fears? Can we give up our fear of the unknown or of failure or of change? Can we give those up just because we are disciples of Jesus Christ and he wants to lead us to someplace new? Can we let the Spirit guide us even if it is someplace hard, someplace that burns, that wipes away our imperfections and makes us something new? What will we have to give up to follow Christ? All those things that Christ promises us, love, joy, peace, all those will come to pass, but he doesn't promise an easy way. As C.S. Lewis warns in another of his books, heaven is open to us all, but we can't bring anything of hell in with us. The spirit is a refiner's fire.

It is the prophet Malachi who refers to God the as the refiner who sits by the fire. (Malachi 3:2-3) We don't have a whole lot of professional refiners when we go out to the mall or to the Farmer's market these days. But in ancient times, a refiner, otherwise known as a silversmith or goldsmith, did show up on a lot of street corners. The process of refining a precious metal removes all the impurities from the precious metal...to enable it to be molded and shaped free from things that mar and deform the metal and lessen its value. It is a fine art, which requires careful attention. The refiner is attentive and deliberate, carefully watching the silver as he holds it in the fire until the silver is purified. This is a fire that burns, but doesn't destroy.

There is a story of a woman who visits a silversmith. She asks him how he knows when the silver is refined. The silversmith responds, “when I can see my face in the silver.”<sup>3</sup> Each of us is precious and God is the refiner, carefully holding his gaze on each of us as he refines precious metal until it reflects

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3 Feldmeyer, Meghan. *Strange Fire*. Duke University Chapel, August 18, 2013

his own image back at him.

It's not easy being a disciple of Jesus Christ. The famous Dallas Cowboys football coach Tom Landry once said that his job was to make young men do things they never wanted to do, in order to become what they had always wanted to be. That's like being a Christian. Before giving us everything, Jesus demands of us everything. All our sins, all our grudges, all our pride, all our self-righteousness—we have to give them all up. But are they what we want to hang on to anyway? Like Isaiah's field, God wants to plant within us, us as individuals and us as a fellowship, the seeds that will grow into love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and all the rest. And isn't that the kind of place we want to live in?