

Thomas R. Cook
St. Stephen's Church – Edina, Minnesota
8:00 and 10:00 a.m. Celebrations of the Holy Eucharist
The Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost – August 14, 2016

“Moving in the Fire”

Scripture: Luke 12:49-56

When I was a little boy, I remember our Sunday School memorized a poem by Charles Wesley that began: “Gentle Jesus, meek and mild, look upon a little child...” Clearly, Mr. Wesley did not take the 12th chapter of Luke into consideration when writing his poem. Meek and mild? Jesus is anything but meek and mild. Try angry, stressed out, threatening, impatient, and incredulous. I think Jesus has just plain had it up to here with the people. He tries to tell them that God loves them; he tries to tell them to love each other; he tries to heal the sick and to be forgiving, and to ask others to be the same. And in return he is belittled, questioned, threatened, ignored, and misunderstood. So he does what most anybody would do when they hit their limit... he gives them a piece of his mind. He belittles peace, he attacks the harmony of the family, he accuses the crowds of being thick-headed and unwilling to acknowledge that their society is crumbling all around them, and he is tired of it. No longer is it just about peace. Now... it's about fire!

There are a couple things I can say about fire this morning, and the first is this... you sure can't ignore it. Fire is nothing if it isn't motivational. Who deals with a fire in the kitchen by taking a comfortable seat in the living room? When something is on fire, we have to act, or we will indeed be overwhelmed.

This is what I think sets Jesus on fire this morning! He sees so many of the people for whom he cares oblivious to their pending downfall. Too many people care too little for each other. The leaders are corrupt and selfish. The religious do what is expected of them in the Temple, but they've forgotten the call to love God and love their neighbor as themselves. Instead they cheat the poor or ignore the needs of the larger society. Violence settles disputes, and fear is a daily companion. And Jesus sees the divisions in his people, he knows it's wrong and it will lead to their downfall, so he tries to start a fire, not to destroy, rather to motivate! Maybe that fire in our hearts will get us moving, changing, working for peace, caring for the needs of others. Because it seems to me that the situation Jesus confronts two thousand years ago is conspicuously like the one we live in today. I fear that either we change our ways, or the consuming fire catches up with us.

There is another thing about fire I would share with you, and this was told me by my allergist. Yes, you heard me right. I'm a sinus allergy sufferer. Some of you

will well know the feeling: puffy, itchy eyes, scratchy throat, constant congestion of the sinuses, pressure behind the eyes. I'm feeling a little of it right now.

But nothing like I used to feel it when I lived in Tennessee. I went to seminary in the forest, ten thousand acres of beautiful woodlands surrounding our little campus of stone chapels, shaded lanes, and stately buildings. And each year, usually twice a year, I was in misery. I would end up in the infirmary, eyes swollen and nose stuffed up, sore throat. It was awful. And each time when I would receive medications to help me cope with the situation, the doctor would tell me that, really, the problem was fire.

Well, not fire, so much as the lack of it. He explained that the domain of Sewanee where we lived had been inhabited by settlers over a couple hundred years ago, and the school had been built up there in the woods, so the last thing anybody wanted was a fire. And year after year the trees dropped their leaves in the fall, and they piled up, pressed down, and rotted. And in the rotting leaves were the fungi, the spores, the pollen, the mold, all the stuff that comes with rotting vegetation. And when the wind kicked up and the bed of the forest was disturbed, all that microscopic stuff came flooding over the places we lived. And for people like me, that meant allergies.

The real solution, my doctor said, was a good forest fire. The kind that would have naturally swept over the forest floor every few years when the leaves and bark matted on the ground had grown thick and dry. They would burn so quickly that the trees themselves, most of them, would be unharmed, but the soil would be opened up again, refreshed and enriched by the clearing left behind, and the overabundance of fungi, spores, pollen, and mold would be cleaned away from the air, burned off by a fast moving, short lived, hot fire.

When Jesus speaks of fire, just what does he mean? Is the *Prince of Peace* calling for the destruction of everything and everyone? I doubt it. But a fire that sweeps rapidly through the underbrush of our lives, that burns clean the accumulated waste of years of injustice, selfishness, inaction, and inattention to the deeper promises of our faith? That fire may be a meaningful metaphor. A fire that motivates us to act in faith and love by the way we serve others, or in the way we vote, or in the way we share our money, or in the compassion we show for those the world rejects? That's a fire that clears the way for new growth in a more peaceful and just world. I encourage not to fear that fire, rather to move through it and learn of it, and grow in faith.

The disciple came to his master, excited to learn the secrets to life. "Master," he said, "Can you teach me the meaning of life?"

"I cannot," replied the master.

“Well, then, will you at least teach me its true goal?”

“No,” said the master, “I will not.”

“Can you say something to me, then, of the nature of death and of life beyond the grave?”
asked the disciple.

“I cannot,” said the master.

So the disciple went away in scorn and dismay. And those others who heard their master answer none of the disciple’s questions questioned him regarding his unwillingness to reveal these important lessons.

And the master said, “What good is it to comprehend life’s nature and meaning if you have never lived it nor confronted the death that awaits us all? I would rather you learn in the fire that is life than only to speculate on it.”