

Pyromaniac

Luke 12:49-53

Sermon by Dan Schrock

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

I

Today the gospel of Luke confronts us with some very difficult words of Jesus.

Jesus sounds as though he’s come to bust up the nuclear family:

⁵¹Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division! ⁵²From now on five in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three; ⁵³they 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.

For Christians living in the United States, these words sound completely wrong. How could Jesus possibly be against the family? Especially in the 1980s and 1990s, we American Christians heard again and again about “family values.” During those years the phrase “family values” became a common political slogan in this country, used by both Republicans and Democrats to try and win votes, even though the meaning of “family values” became squishy because Democrats and Republicans used the phrase to mean significantly different things. Whatever “family values” actually meant in that political debate, it emphasized for many Americans that the institution of the family is hugely important for broader society.

Therefore for American Christians these words of Jesus are disturbing. But they were also disturbing for people in the first century Mediterranean world. Virtually everyone in the first century agreed that families were the essential building block for society. Romans believed this; Greeks believed this; Egyptians believed this; Jews believed

this. Everyone believed that their core identity came from their extended family of grandparents and parents, uncles and aunts, brothers and sisters and in-laws. Basically, your identity as an individual came from your family. If they were honorable, so were you. If they were dishonorable, so were you. If they had a high social status or a low social status, then you automatically had that same status.

This shared identity even extended into occupations. If your dad was a lowly shepherd, then you would probably be a lowly shepherd too. If your classy mother was a dealer of purple cloth, like Lydia in Acts 16, then you'd probably inherit the family business. You'd learn the detailed craft of making and selling the cloth that was prized above all other cloths.

In other words, family was almost everything. From it came your identity, social status, vocation, sense of belonging, and to some extent, your life purpose. Without your family, you were essentially nobody, worth nothing that mattered in the social mores of that culture.

And then along comes Jesus, who announces that his ministry and mission will have the effect of busting up families.

Why on earth does Jesus insist that he brings division?

II

Jesus himself offers a clue. In verse 49 he opens a doorway for understanding this passage when he says: "I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled!"

Let's put this in modern language: Jesus is a pyromaniac. His mission is to ignite fires in people. Within his heart, a holy fire burns hot—and he wants that fire to leap from his own heart into the hearts of Mary Magdalene and Peter and Susanna and Thaddeus and every other human heart. The fire for God that he knows and loves is the fire he wants every human person to know and love. This fire-starter wants a burning humanity.

A story from the desert fathers of the third and fourth centuries illustrates the new ignited humanity that Jesus envisions. One day the hermit Lot came to his fellow hermit Joseph with a question. “Father, according as I am able, I keep my little rule, and my little fast, my prayer, meditation and silence; and as I am able, I strive to cleanse my heart of distracting thoughts. Now what more should I do?”

Joseph rose up in reply and stretched out his hands to heaven, and his fingers became like ten lamps of fire. He replied: “Why not become fire?”

For Jesus, nothing else was as important as the fire of God—breathing it, fueling it, obeying it, living it. About this Jesus was passionate. Everything else was secondary, including family. Jesus made this clear back in Luke 8:19-21 when his mother, Mary, and his biological brothers came to talk to him. Instead of rushing out of the house where he was staying in order to talk with them, Jesus insulted them. He turned to the crowds and said, “My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it.”

I have a hunch that Mary and her other children were deeply offended when Jesus said this. In effect he was denying that his biological family of origin was primary. His identity and vocation and purpose did not come from his biological family. It came instead from his new spiritual family in the kingdom of God. *That* was the true family.

The simple reality, attested to again and again in the gospels, is that Jesus was a polarizing figure. Some people were attracted to the fire he lived while others were repelled by it. The truth is that a lot of people don’t want this kind of spiritual fire, then or now. A lot of people don’t even like this sort of spiritual fire. Having such intense fire burning within you could get you killed, as it got Jesus killed. Some people don’t want to pay that kind of price, even though this fire is one of the sweetest delights available to us in this world.

III

Jesus says in Luke 12 that this fire will end up causing divisions in families. He’s being descriptive, not prescriptive. He’s merely telling it like it is: some family members will join the newly emerging kingdom of God but other family members will not. Some

members of your biological family will burn with God's fire, and some won't want the fire at all. Jesus isn't saying that's the way it should be, because if he had his druthers, every heart in every family would burn with God. All he's saying is that some family members will not want the fire, and when that happens, there's division in the family.

If we think about the realities of our own families, most of us here today know exactly what Jesus is talking about. Some of our own children don't want God's fire. But even if all of your children know and love the fire, I'll bet you can think of people in your extended family who do not. You know intimately the subtle (or not so subtle) divisions between family members who have the fire of God and those who do not.

IV

Once in another church I was part of a class on Jesus and families. People in that congregation lived far away from their families of origin. Many were single people or people without children. For the most part, there were no extended family relationships in the congregation—no grandparents or grandchildren, no uncles or aunts or cousins. By hundreds of miles, people in the congregation were separated from their families of origin.

Truth be told, most of them liked it that way. Some members had been sexually molested by their own father or grandfather or uncle. Some had been abused. Some had grown up in homes where their own mothers screamed at them, saying "I don't love you!" A lot of people in the congregation were mighty glad to be living several hundred miles away from their families.

That Sunday in that class, we were studying this text and related texts on Jesus and families. We were trying to understand why Jesus insists that relationships in the newly emerging kingdom of God are vastly more important than relationships in our families of origin. As we talked we slowly realized what gift Jesus was offering us. We began to sense that here, in this congregation, we were being given a new network of relationships to replace the sometimes sad, sometimes troubled, sometimes painful relationships in our families of origin. That day, in that class, as we glimpsed the reality of Jesus' new

eschatological family among us, our hearts burned yet again with the fire of God. We too became pyromaniacs.