

Changing the World  
St. Philip's  
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P. Potter

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Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts, be always acceptable in your sight, O God our rock and our redeemer. *Amen*

## **I. Introduction**

Father against son and son against father?

Mother against daughter and daughter against mother?

Mother-in-law against daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law?

And we thought Jesus was the Prince of Peace. But perhaps we should think again.

## **II. The Path of Disruption**

As depicted in the 12<sup>th</sup> Chapter of Luke, which we have been reading this month, Jesus is speaking to a crowd of thousands, urging upon them lives of true faith in action – be

dressed for action and have your lamps lit. Jesus warns against the hypocrisy of formalistic religion – beware the yeast of the Pharisees. Over the past several weeks we have heard how Jesus juxtaposed sincere professions and practices of faith with ritualism where words and posturing substitute for truth. Over the past few weeks we have heard Jesus urge his listeners to put aside petty concerns over an abundance of possessions - like the rich landowner we heard of two weeks ago, who wanted a bigger barn. Or as we heard last week to put aside worries about food and clothing - Jesus assures his listeners, “do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom.”

And then? Just as folks were getting comfortable, Jesus proclaims in today’s passage that he has come to bring fire to the earth and can’t wait to light the flame – “I wish it were already kindled!” he says. Drawing on a powerful local metaphor of destruction – fire was a constant threat to the crops and homes of the people living in arid Palestine, Jesus declares his intent to raze, to destroy, the expectations and practices of the world. But perhaps this is not about

destruction so much as about new life. For along with destruction, fire also brings the possibility of new crops, rebuilt homes, and as we know in our own context of British Columbia, new forests. Jesus kindles the fire of re-birth.

Jesus proclaims that he will not bring peace but division. Recalling our Evening Prayer collect for peace, we ask for the peace that the world cannot give. And so perhaps we can understand that what Jesus is rejecting is the peace that the world offers. The peace of complacency, the peace of “go along to get along,” the peace of compliance that the powerful in our world would be very happy if we embraced. Instead, Jesus aims to set father against son, mother against daughter, mother in law against daughter in law, thus challenging the traditional standards, norms, rules that governed daily life in his time. The traditional family where the father ruled and sons obeyed, where mothers guided and daughters followed, where the mother of the groom held sway over the bride (not so with fathers in law who often had little if anything to do with their sons in law since the wedded daughter generally moved into and became part of her

husband's family). Jesus aims to disrupt the peace that supports these sorts of arrangements, in order to offer something more.

In taking on traditional family roles - those most hallowed elements of social tradition, Jesus reminds his listeners and reminds us all, that God is more important than worldly arrangements, that faith is more important than worldly priorities, that disruption of tradition is an essential component of our path to reconciliation and redemption. But this is not disruption of tradition for its own sake, but rather aims to open our hearts and minds to other realities, other possibilities, to the peace that the world cannot give.

### **III. Setting Priorities Through Ministry**

Jesus challenges his listeners to get their priorities straight – you can predict the weather so why can't you understand the present time. You can interpret the physical world around you but why can't you see that the times, indeed the world, need the message of salvation from the Son of God, the Redeemer of humanity, who is standing

right in front of you? What are we to take from this? Well perhaps we are being urged, as the Letter of James has it, to be doers of the Word, not just hearers. Jesus calls us to walk the walk, not just talk about it. To spread the message of salvation by living out our faith, in action.

And now are we to do this? In the words of today's Psalm 82, we are called to ministry in the world – to save the widow and the orphan, defend the humble and the needy, to rescue the weak and the poor. And we are called to challenge the power of the wicked – not only speaking truth to power but perhaps more importantly standing up for values. Standing up for faith values that contradict the dominant themes of our day. Themes like accumulation of wealth (as Jesus said to the rich landowner in our reading from two weeks ago, “life does not consist in the abundance of possessions”). Standing up for values that reject the pursuit of power and status (recall in last week's Gospel reading how Jesus blessed the slaves who stand ready for the return of their master – the way we should stand ready for the coming of the Son of Man). Ready to change the world – and ourselves.

As we focus on ministries under our roof and beyond our walls, we are called to be faithful. In the passage from Jeremiah read this morning, we are reminded that prophecy and dreams are valuable only when infused with our devotion to the Divine – “let the one who has my word speak my word faithfully.” Recalling Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians, we are reminded that without love such apparent virtues as knowledge, prophecy and charity are of little import. So it is not only what we do, but how we do it. Not just the content of our ministry but the spirit as well. Doing the right thing, for the right reasons, in the right way.

#### **IV. Understanding and Action: The Path to Salvation**

And why? Not only because faithful understanding and action are essential to effective ministry, but also because they are steps toward salvation, steps toward reconciliation with God, toward finding the peace that the world cannot give. Finding peace through action. Jesus offers true peace, through the fire of new life and the disruption of old habits. And so we are called to follow, to understand and to respond

to these troubled times we face today. Troubled times where inequality and injustice abound – are we to be content with understanding economic statistics on inequalities in income and distribution, or go farther to pursue systemic change in our economic systems of ownership and exchange of property that create such inequalities. Troubled times where militarism and violence thwart efforts at peace and justice – are we to be content to understand the hypocrisy of authoritarian calls for violence and vengeance, or go farther to actively confront oppression in our communities and in our world. Troubled times where pursuit of profit leads to destruction of the very Earth upon which we depend – are we to be content with predicting and adjusting to the weather, or go farther to address the primary existential crisis of our times, climate change.

In these troubled times, we are called to understand and to live out that understanding in all that we do. To know that we need God and to live out that need in all that we do. To know that we are blessed by God's presence and to live out that blessing in all that we do. To look forward to being

reconciled with God and to live out that hope in all we do. To pursue the peace that the world cannot give, in all we do.

Jesus proclaims he will bring fire to the earth – to kindle our commitment to faith in action. Jesus proclaims he will bring division – to inspire us to overcome comfortable complacency and get busy changing the world. Jesus warns that the Kingdom of God is not just an add-on, not just decoration or justification for the current state of affairs but rather requires that we replace tradition and convention with a new world of justice and peace. That our salvation derives not from the formalistic yeast of the Pharisees, not from possessions, not from power and status, but from true faith. True faith that impels us to act, to change the world and change ourselves. To find true salvation. To find peace.

**Let us pray:** Holy One, we thank you for challenging us to redirect our priorities, to build a new world, and to find salvation through faithful ministry. We ask for your continued to guidance on this journey. We pray in the name of Jesus the Christ in whom our hopes are founded. *Amen*