



# Grace Church

The Rev. Dr. Matthew Calkins  
Rector

## Fire, Truth, Love

### Sermon for the Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost, August 14, 2016

*Readings:* Jeremiah 23:23-29; Hebrews 11:29-12:2; Luke 12:32-40

*Sermon text:* Jesus said, "I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled!" Luke 12:32

Let's make a connection this morning between passages in scripture that bear on the idea of the word of God as *fire*, *truth* and *love*.

But first let me light a couple of candles—fire in our midst. Nice, gentle fire. Fire as light, fire as warmth, fire to cook with, civilizing fire. And then there's the fire on the mountain.

When I was a boy growing up in the foothills of Los Angeles, once or twice we had to evacuate because of a forest fire coming near. Have you been a forest fire? It is an awesome and frightening force of nature. A forest fire is no gentle thing, but powerfully destructive, fast-moving, death-dealing. But also cleansing, a reset button, part of the cycle of life. Though nowadays, thanks to human-fueled climate change, it is part of an accelerated and more extreme cycle.

Finally, there is the fire next time—the Day of judgment, the refining, cleansing and tormenting fire of the apocalypse, and what scripture calls the pit of Gehenna, hellfire. All of these are in the Bible—fire is a multivalent symbol for the power and word and judgment of God.

According to Luke's gospel, Jesus tells his disciples, "I came to bring fire to the earth" (Luke 12:32). He is ready and willing to use it: "and how I wish it were already kindled!" The point seems to be that the proclamation of God's coming kingdom, the gospel or good news that Jesus was anointed to bring, will be a litmus test, a crisis, a dividing line, a refining fire. As people respond differently to Jesus and his proclamation of the gospel so difference and division results. "Do you think I came to bring peace to the earth," asked Jesus. "No, I tell you, rather division" (Luke 12:52).

This accords with the thought expressed in the opening chapter of the gospel according to John, where the coming of the Word of God—full of grace and truth, light and life—is yet resisted by some, even "his own people." Jesus did not come to judge but to save, the Evangelist writes, yet many will prefer darkness to light—current ways of life, even though destructive and unhealthy and ultimately

doomed, to transformation, conversion, renewal—for changing mind and life (*metanoia*) is difficult and painful. You can alienate friends and family. It is a kind of death, though leading to new life.

In today's lesson Jesus warns that families will be divided one against another along generational lines. Presumably other divisions also: clans, tribes, nations—and communities of faith. For even when people respond with faith to the gospel, and become members of the body of Christ, there remain divisions. As Paul notes in his first letter to the Corinthians, "When you come together as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you; and to some extent I believe it. Indeed, there have to be factions [literally, heresies] among you, for only so will it become clear who among you are genuine" (1 Cor 11:18-19).

Truth emerges through the clash of ideas and the test of practice. Change, division and struggle is the way of nature as well as religious conversion. As Heraclitus, the pre-Socratic philosopher of Ephesus long ago observed, strife, war and change—the element of fire in his cosmology— are the constant backdrop in which we try to discern order, which he calls Logos, reason, truth. Hobbes and Darwin brought this perspective to bear in modernity—following up on the work of Francis Bacon and the new science—the pursuit of empirically observed rather than revealed truth. So adaptation is a consequence of struggle and division.

And just as science discern law-like patterns in the changes of nature, so we may ask if there is a logos, or pattern and reason, behind the strife and division Jesus brings to earth. "In the beginning was the Logos, and the Logos was with God and the Logos was God" (John 1:1). The Logos is normally translated as Word, and thus John testifies to Jesus as the Word or Logos of God. Another word for this is truth.

Toward the end of the gospel according to John, Jesus replies to Pilate's interrogation about Jesus' claim to be the king of the Jews, "You say that I am a king. In fact, the reason I was born and came into the world is to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me" (John 18:37).

"'What is truth?' said jesting Pilate, and would not stay for the answer" (Francis Bacon, "On Truth").

If Pilate had stayed, Jesus might have repeated what he said earlier in his journey to the cross: "I am the way, the truth, and the life" (John 14:6).

Our Vestry is currently reading *Holy Currencies: Six Blessings for Sustainable Missional Ministries* by Eric H. F. Law. Law considers money only one of the currencies available for supporting mission programs—though it is usually the only one we think of. As the word currency implies, money is only useful—doing actual work—when it circulates. But other activities circulate in the community and help sustain mission—provide blessings and encourage support. These include building relationships, showing compassion, "feeding the multitudes" promoting wellness, providing gracious leadership, and telling the truth.

I mention Law's work because I like his comment on truth and the usual interpretation of John 14:6, though perhaps it is good to remind the Finance Committee, which meets after the service, that money is only one of six currencies and all must circulate in the community to be a blessing.

Law notes concerning Jesus' claim that he is the way, the truth and the life that both "way" and "life" are not points in time but include a beginning, middle and end—and are judged as a whole. Similarly, he suggests we should consider "truth" less as a fact or set of facts at a point of time, but in the context of unfolding and through the variety of perspectives needed to assess it as a whole. The truth of Jesus is not a simple claim that we must accept him right this instant as Lord and Savior and everything then falls into place. But the way of Jesus, his life, death and resurrection, form a whole; and the whole is a pattern (*logos*) reflecting the will of God. Thus we see that the will of God is for ultimate healing and salvation, for peace and eternal life. Though the way brings and passes through fire, though Jesus died on the cross, the truth marches on: life overcomes death, love overcomes hate. This is our hope. This is our faith. This is the Truth.

I would like to conclude with a bit of T.S. Eliot, from his great poem, *The Four Quartets*, written during a time of world war—a conflagration of many nations. He served as a air marshall during the London bombings. The last of the *Four Quartets*, "Little Gidding," includes an image of descending fire—but evokes the Holy Spirit as well as war. We have a choice, the poet writes:

The only hope, or else despair  
Lies in the choice of pyre or pyre-  
to be redeemed from fire by fire.

We have no choice but to take sides, to make choices—even indifference and indecision is a kind of choice ("which resembles the others as death resembles life"). We choose knowing there is no perfect choice. We choose knowing that history will judge all choices as both flawed and yet somehow this is the will of God. This is Love.

Who then devised the torment? Love.  
Love is the unfamiliar Name  
Behind the hands that wove  
The intolerable shirt of flame  
Which human power cannot remove.  
We only live, only suspire  
Consumed by either fire or fire.

In God's mercy, all will be woven into a pattern of redemption. As Julian of Norwich long ago wrote, all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well. And our lifetime journey through growth and struggle and choice and change and loss and gain may end with a clear and true vision of life as a heroic exploration and incorporation of opposites into a whole. The long poem ends with a beautiful valediction, quoting Dame Julian:

We shall not cease from exploration  
And the end of our exploring  
Will be to arrive where we started  
And know the place for the first time.

A condition of complete simplicity  
(Costing not less than everything)  
And all shall be well and  
All manner of thing shall be well  
When the tongues of flame are in-folded  
Into the crowned knot of fire  
And the fire and the rose are one.

May God bless us all in our journeys home, in the name of Christ, Amen.

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