

GO! SET THE WORLD ON FIRE!
20th Sunday in OT: August 14, 2022
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The talking heads on the evening news and the opinion writers in the mainstream media tells us that we are a divided country. I have to say that I agree with those sentiments. One need only glance at the headlines for confirmation... there is pro-life vs pro-abortion... support the police and defund the police... conservative and liberal... those that believe in global warming and those that think it's a bunch of bunk... there are public arguments over critical race theory, transgender policies, gun control, so-called wokeness and how to fight crime and violence. It seems that we are now more separated than ever before with everyone offended, hurt or angry about something. Even religion, since the dawn of civilization, has been a flash point for wars and conflict... in some ways Jesus was aiming to just that... not necessarily to start wars but to at least make his followers and his believers aware

of the not-always-positive consequences of being one of the Messiah's students. Radical thoughts and beliefs often lead to conflict.

Our gospel today from St. Luke is in two parts, much like a hinge with Jesus acting at the lynch pin. We again find Jesus on the road headed towards Jerusalem with his band of apostles and followers. It seems that the crowd is rather ho-hum with the messages and teachings Jesus has been sharing. In an effort to get their attention, Jesus presents a rather startling picture of the Messianic future.

Jesus was enthusiastic about the mission given to him by the father. There was energy and momentum to carry it out. He was in harmony with God and was excited to share the Good News with the people. As anxious and filled with trepidation as he was knowing what his future held, Jesus was excited that the people would finally be reconciled with the father. In harkening back to the words of John the Baptist, "I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me comes one who... will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire (Matthew 3:1)." Jesus points to his unique baptism not as when John baptized him in

the Jordan but the baptism of his passion and crucifixion where he will willingly take our sins upon himself.

He also points to fire. Fire can be many things... something to cook upon, something to give warmth, a source of light... it can also be a destructive force burning forests and homes. Biblical fire is often seen as purifying. The point is, Jesus was passionate about his mission... he is on fire for God! So often Catholics, Christians, look like a discouraged group with little passion in their lives for what they profess to believe. We freely talk about those beliefs within the confines of church walls or with like-minded believers but we rarely step out of our comfort zone to demonstrate and defend our faith. And yet, we have freely chosen to follow someone who set the example by bringing fire to the earth and who begs us to do the same.

Jesus knows this mission will not be easy. He warns us that following him with passion will create division between homes, family and friends. Even his first disciples were called “disturbers of the peace (Acts 16:20).” I experienced this faith divide firsthand when I first

considered entering the seminary. Raised a strict Baptist, I truly feared telling my dad about my plans... I even begged my mom to tell him which she wanted no part of. When I mustered the courage, the passion, to tell him, the anticipated fireworks started. “Why does it have to be Catholic?!” he demanded to know. “Why can’t you be a Baptist pastor?” I knew he was angry and I felt like I had terribly disappointed him. I believed converting to Catholicism was going to be a never-ending point of friction between us, but... God, the healer, found a way and 10 years ago at the ripe old age of 78 he converted.... and sharing our faith with each is now a point of great joy. While Jesus speaks of division... his end goal is never war, strife or conflict but a joining of love *with* God, our creator.

Living out our lives as a champion of Jesus should be anything other than dull. We are meant to be on fire with God’s love, open to be moved by the Holy Spirit. In prayer, we should be seeking where our lives have become bland, asking God to free us to become fully alive, to make our hearts burn with the same fire that descended on Pentecost.

The words we hear from Jesus today are uncomfortable... religious, spiritual, faith-filled people will almost always be opposed in our world which often seems separated, upside-down, and gone wrong. When someone comes speaking the truth, the truth that is God, we think they are crazy and dangerous. Jesus' word is meant to burn things up, reduce things to cinders, to clear away the dead wood. Jesus never called for a get-along attitude. To love is to will the good of the other... to be in passionate in opposition to works of evil in the other... that clearing makes way for the Good News to take root. We must have courage to be the spark in someone's life!

A final story to illustrate: When St. Teresa of Avila travelled about Spain founding monasteries, she took with her an uneducated lay sister called Anne of St. Bartholomew. After Teresa's death, this sister, against her will, was promoted to Prioress. She was asked not only to found new monasteries herself but do so in foreign countries. She complained to God in prayer, "Lord, how can you ask all of this of me? I am nothing but straw!" And he replied, "Ah, but it is with straws like this that I light my fire."