

PILGRIM C H U R C H

An open and affirming congregation of the United Church of Christ

I HAVE COME TO CAST FIRE ON THE EARTH

Luke 12: 49-56

August 19, 2007

Pilgrim Bud Precise

"I have come to cast fire on the earth!"

Many times we come to church seeking a place of comfort, calm – a place of quiet consolation. For many of us, life is in the fast lane much of the week.

I think of Miriam and Barrett in Athens. Miriam is beginning her pediatric practice and Barrett his course work on his PhD in education. Along with moving, getting organized at home, work and school – well, I suspect life is busy, hectic during these days.

Our parents of school age children – Mandy and Derek, Catherine, Jennifer know the joy of beginning a new school year. Mary is beginning the school year at Altamont. School is exciting, but it does bring its share of getting into a new routine from the summer.

I can't even imagine Skip as he commutes to Philadelphia to work. Maybe Bob is settling in teaching his classes in law school. Nancy Lavender has her new job. I suspect there are interesting days in the life of Nelson and his law work in Jasper. John is busy with those eye exams and I suspect ballet will pick up for Libba.

Life is busy. Some of us don't work full time. I think of Mary Lou, Fran, Pat, Virginia, Laurella, and Rod. I can't count Ethel in that because she works every day here at church. But with the weather, the coal miners trapped, the war in Iraq and the coming of hurricane Dean, even those of us not working full time have our hands full. Life is in the fast lane much of the time.

One of the major reasons people come to church is to center themselves, to touch base with what is stable and dependable, to get grounded. I think that is not a bad reason. Look at this building we are in. It is bigger and heavier than it needs to be. It is permanent – fixed. You can't move our pews around, they are bolted down. The day school spent thousands of dollars just last year on a fire alarm system. And even during this heat wave we are in here in the midst of August, the building is cool enough.

Church is where we come to sort things out, to slow down, cool down, quiet down, and settle down. Church is where we come to find our center.

I wonder if we will be able to hear the words of Jesus in the Gospel of Luke today. "I have come to cast fire on the earth. Do you think I have come to bring peace? No I have come to bring fire. To split up families, divide homes." Fire.

You should know that this is not my favorite passage in the bible. I feel anxious when we come to this Sunday of the church year. This text and much of Luke runs counter to so much of what we want Jesus to be. We want Jesus to comfort, to bring healing, to sooth us in our busy world. I get nervous when Jesus starts to talk about casting fire upon the earth.

Remember the children of Israel? God sent Moses to free them from slavery in Egypt. No sooner had they been made free that life in the wilderness was not what they had in mind for freedom. They said, "You know, at least as Pharaoh's slaves we had three meals a day. We don't even know where we are going?" God did not say, "Well, just go back to slavery." Or, "I'll show you. I will just let you live in the wilderness." No, God said, "I will give you a pillar of fire to lead you into the future. I am taking you places you have never been."

In our reading of Moses today, he is over there in Median. He had killed a man back in Egypt. Moses

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is on the run. He is trying to blend in with the surroundings, he is a shepherd. Moses sees this bush on fire. He goes over to see it and God's voice speaks to Moses out of the burning bush. Fire. "Moses, I am sending you to stand up to Pharaoh and speak for me."

After the death and resurrection of Jesus, the disciples gathered in this room and locked the doors. They were going through the motions of worship. Jesus comes among them. Someone shouted "Fire!" We call that day Pentecost. The church was born as the spirit of God rested on the shoulders of the disciples as flames of fire.

I don't believe Jesus is announcing here in Luke that he no longer follows the commandment to honor your father and your mother. I don't believe we can use this passage to prove we are persecuted because we are Christians. Sometimes we are persecuted because of our Christian witness. But sometimes Christians are persecuted not because they are Christian, but because they are wrong doers, they are mischief makers. The minister in our city who disobeyed the law on filing income taxes was not persecuted because he was a Christian. He was convicted because he had broken the law. There is no value in suffering for the wrong cause.

I do believe that Jesus is addressing the coming trial of his life, his commitment in Jerusalem. The gospel of John understands Jesus is the crisis of the world. Crisis does not mean emergency – but a moment of truth for a decision about life. Making a decision is critical. Decisions usually mean to turn to a certain goal or value and to turn away from another goal or value. Luke is saying that Jesus is making a difference, even within families. Peace as a sense of status quo is now disrupted.

In East Germany, years ago, a pastor who had suffered much under the communist, complained about the influx into his congregation of young, angry, disaffected rebels. "We're a closed society. There is nowhere for their dissent to be heard but in the church.

It is the only place to take out your anger against the government. So they buy denim jeans, let their hair grow long, and come to church where they are free to be angry."

I pray that Pilgrim will never become a safe, all-inclusive place of middle class refuge for secure stability, where we just come to cool off and cool down the message of Jesus that calls us to excitement of living in the world.

"I have come to cast fire upon the earth." I don't know what all that means. But I do think that when we welcome people of different color, we are fanning the flames. I do believe that when we welcome people of different sexual orientation, we are kindling the fire. I do believe that when we welcome people of different thought and opinion, to be free to think and reach toward their potential, we are being the church. I believe when Pilgrim stood firm in its commitment to the black community back during the 60's at the height of the civil rights movement, that we were casting light. I believe when we write a resolution for peace in Iraq, we are about the business of disrupting the status quo. And I believe when had the courage a couple of years ago to begin this process of working on our future, we were about the business of casting fire to build our future.

Last Sunday the gospel lesson in Luke stated "Fear not, little flock. It is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom." Many times membership in the kingdom means a presence in time of trouble. It means a community that provides hope and support in time of need.

Today we are reminded that a part of the kingdom is to cast fire on the earth.