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Faith Isn't Easy
Luke 12:49-56

*Jesus said: "I have come to **cast fire upon the earth**, and how I wish it were **already ablaze!**" ⁵⁰ I have a **baptism** with which to be baptized, and what constraint I am under until it is completed! ⁵¹ Do you think that I have come **to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division!**" ⁵² From now on five in one household will be **divided**, three against two and two against three; ⁵³ they 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."*

⁵⁴ *He also said to the crowds, "When you see a cloud rising in the west, you immediately say, 'It is going to rain,' and so it happens. ⁵⁵ And when you see the south wind blowing, you say, 'There will be scorching heat,' and it happens. ⁵⁶ You **hypocrites!** You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but why do you not know how to **interpret the present time?**"*

Geez, Jesus.

I came to cast fire?

I came to bring **division, not peace?**

Households will be **divided?**

We're all **hypocrites** who don't know what's happening right in front of us?

Gosh, could you be a little bit softer, Jesus?

What happened to the Jesus who brings peace on earth, goodwill to all?

What happened to the Jesus who appeared in a locked room to his disciples, and offered them peace?

Where is that Jesus, and can we have HIM instead of these verses?

By some accounts, these are the eight toughest verses in the whole Gospel!

And it seems so out of character for Jesus!

But is it?

When Jesus starts his journey to Jerusalem, and the cross,

He has a sharper edge to his teaching and preaching.

Maybe that sharper edge is meant to SHARPEN US?

After all, this is the same Jesus who *upsets the societal order*—and the status quo, by socializing with outcasts, children, the sick, even women!

This is the same Jesus who says that the first will be last and the last will be first.

The context of this preaching is a bunch of warnings—

to not worry, to turn away from greed,

to be prepared for God's day of judgment and the return of the Messiah.

And here Jesus talks about fire on earth.

Now at the beginning of his ministry, Jesus is baptized by John the Baptist—

And John promised that the one coming after him

would bring *a baptism of fire and Spirit*.

At the end of the Gospel of Luke, Jesus promises the Holy Spirit—

and as the Book of Acts begins, fire descends upon praying believers who are all gathered together at Pentecost—and suddenly they all preach!

Fire has different properties, doesn't it?

It can be destructive.

But it can also be refining.

In Malachi 3, the prophet speaks about *the refiner's fire, refining silver---*

and people would have known how that process is complete

when the refiner *can see his own image* in the shimmering surface of the liquid metal.

What if THAT is the fire that Jesus brings?

What if THAT is the baptism that he's talking about here?

What if it's a *refining fire that brings clarity*,

to refine us and mold us, until he can see *His image IN us*?

Now fire IS FIRE, of course.

It's hot, and it can consume anything in its path.

It's nothing to play around with.

But isn't that true of our faith in Jesus?

It too, is nothing to play around with.

Jesus is SERIOUS about loving us—enough to die for us on the cross.

But, how seriously do we take HIM?

How seriously do we follow him, and ask *What Would Jesus Do?*

Are we willing to ASK that---and then DO it?

Could this be at the heart of all his talk of division?

Jesus says he didn't come to bring peace, but division.

Now we know Jesus DID come to bring peace, that's irrefutable.

But here, in these instances, it's division that he brings.

And he's very specific about the dividing lines.

father against son, and son against father

mother against daughter, and daughter against mother,

mother-in-law against daughter-in-law, and vice versa.

You know what those specific relationships all had in common in Jesus' day?

They were all built on ***obligation and DUTY***.

And often a lot of guilt,

even shame to keep people in line.

For instance, an eldest son was expected to inherit from and carry on the father's business, name, and become head of the household.

Younger sons were free to move away.

Daughters were expected to remain pure until marriage,

and mothers were tasked with making sure their daughters did so.

Daughters-in-law were expected to move into their husband's household,

and get along with their mother-in-law,

especially by being subservient, and by giving birth—to a son.

Sally Smith Holt, *Connections*, Year C, Vol 3, pg. 249-250.

Relationships between siblings, or mothers and sons, or fathers and daughters—they didn't involve that same ***duty and obligation***.

So, what if this list is DESCRIPTIVE of what happens in following Jesus?

As opposed to PRESCRIPTIVE—or something we should go and do.

Jesus is NOT telling us to start divisions within families.

But rather, such divisions may happen, as we follow Jesus Christ.

And Jesus did have a DIFFERENT view of FAMILY.

When his mother and brothers came looking for him,
He said, “*my mother and brothers are those who hear the Word of God and do it*”
in Luke 8:21.

What if Jesus is saying that ***divisions that break down relationships*** of
Obligation, duty, guilt and shame---might be a good thing?

What if sometimes, such division means
that the Gospel is ***breaking into our lives?***

***What if Jesus is giving us a heads-up,
that some divisions—are to be EXPECTED when following Him?***

We definitely see that right now in our society and our churches.

Different people see things differently.

And that’s OK.

There are some issues that unite us, and others that divide.

Living with diverse opinions is always risky, uncomfortable,
and an act of faith in the body of Christ.

Being a purple church like ours, isn’t easy.

But it’s one thing I love about our family of faith.

We don’t all see things the same way.

And that’s great!

Diversity is good—uncomfortable—but good.

God made people different,

God gave us different opinions and different ideas.

We ***can and should learn*** from one another.

Elizabeth Caldwell says that “*this Gospel text challenges our comfortable faith
and our expectation that members of our faith communities will always agree*”

Connections, Year C. Volume 3, pg. 248.

Does this mean that we should all AGREE TO DISAGREE about everything?

Not exactly.

There are ***some things that Jesus calls us to do and be,***

There are ways of living that are Christ’s calling on our lives,

For all of us,

regardless of different political or social opinions.

What Jesus came to teach us, and show us, and model for us—is our truth.

We are called to follow Him.

One of my colleagues in ministry, Pastor Preston Sharpe, in his newsletter, writes about how the Kingdom of God that Jesus proclaimed and ushered in, Is world-altering.

And life-changing.

And it is “not an ‘add-on’”.

It means that ***everything must change, and not just subtle change.***

It means that ***behavior, patterns, habits and comfort*** will all be challenged as we move closer to Jesus.

It doesn't mean the rejection of our families, but rather ***seeing them in a new light.***

It means ***seeing everything in a new light***—the light of Jesus Christ.

He writes: “*We should pay attention to our discomfort, and the ways that Jesus disrupts our livesto heal a broken world*”.

Rev. Preston Sharpe, The Art of Preaching.com, August 13, 2025.

I wonder, if all of this talk of division and fire is Jesus telling us that we should get beyond duty, comfort, and social norms?

What if Jesus doesn't want us to just keep the status quo?

What if he came to disrupt our lives, so that we can find ***true beauty and hope*** out of our brokenness—the brokenness of our hearts, and our world?

Remember our theme for Lent in 2024?

We studied a book called *Mosaic: When God Uses All the Pieces*.

Remember what we learned?

We learned that Jesus uses all the broken pieces of our lives, to make something beautiful, kind of the way we used a bunch of broken glass to make the beautiful mosaic now in our Narthex—a symbol of our united church.

And, what if Jesus is ALSO talking about FREEDOM and liberation?

I mean, if we throw off living out of duty and obligation, we are free to follow Jesus in a whole new way, right?

What if letting go of the status quo means we can receive a new calling—to do the work of God, by following Jesus Christ?

Ask yourself this:

Are there duties and obligations keeping me from doing the work of the kingdom of God?

How can we LET GO of that?
And embrace what Jesus is guiding us to be and do?

You know, sometimes even good things—like *family and work and friends*—
Can become a hindrance to our faith—if we are not putting God FIRST.

How do you put Jesus FIRST in your life?

How do you follow Jesus BEFORE everything else?

For me, I have to regularly check myself.

I have to ask myself—is that what Jesus wants me to say, and do?

Is this the path that He has for me, right now?

Or is this just something that I want, ***or that others want me to do?***

In the words of Paul in Galatians 1:10,

am I seeking the approval of people, or of God?

That's always ***an important question*** to ask ourselves.

And an equally important question for our CHURCH.

What is our mission at FPC Matawan?

Are we following the whims of people, or the calling of Jesus?

And how do we follow in the footsteps of Jesus?

Are we just ***keeping an institution going***—or are we being ***true disciples?***

Listening to God's call—and allowing ourselves to be filled with the power of the Holy Spirit!

And do we ask ourselves these questions--whenever we spend money,
or take up missions or ministries,
when we study, fellowship, or reach out into the community?

We need these guiding principles—of putting Jesus first.

Of asking What Would Jesus Do, and doing it!

***You know, sometimes the BROKEN places in our lives and churches,
actually help us to follow Jesus this way.***

I remember when my best friend Nancy was killed by a drunk driver
when we were in college.

Her parents, Melinda and Don, took that brokenness,
and turned it into a mission to talk to high school kids about the dangers of
drinking and driving.

They got youth groups together to talk about it.

Have you ever felt such a passion, arise out of brokenness?

Sometimes our brokenness leads to new callings.

Think about the single-minded passion of Jesus.

It reminds me of Nancy's parents,

Or a neighborhood activist who organizes after a local shooting,

Or a senior citizen who works with legislators to make prescriptions affordable,

Or a teen who sees trash in the ocean, and starts an earth care program.

Brokenness can lead to faithfulness.

Jesus went to the cross, for us.

He takes us and our lives so seriously.

The question is, ***do we take HIM SERIOUSLY?***

Is Jesus our ***first allegiance?***

Is our faith in Christ ***the priority, above all else?***

Friends, today the Good News of the Gospel ISN'T EASY.

Because FAITH ISN'T EASY.

Jesus came to bring ***a refining fire*** to our lives and our churches.

He came to upset the status quo, to get us out of comfort zones,

And into the Kingdom of God.

Will we listen and follow Him?

May God give us the courage to follow the One who has given everything for us.

Amen.