

I was the associate priest at a church in south London during the early 2000s. A regular attender at that church was a teenage girl who appeared to be deeply troubled. She was loud, crude, dressed provocatively, and had little appreciation for social boundaries. She was heavily tattooed and had body piercings long before such things became as commonplace as they are today. She boisterously craved attention. None of her family members had anything to do with the church, and by every indication she had an unhappy home life. But week after week, bless her, she attended worship at that parish church. Clearly, the church provided her with a sense of acceptance and belonging amid her otherwise hard life.

This young woman was one of the volunteers who occasionally read the scripture lessons during worship services. She invariably was a distraction whenever it was her turn to read. Her appearance, and body language, and the exaggerated tones of her voice captured the congregation's attention more than the words she was reading. My clearest memory of her, and indeed my clearest memory of that parish during the several years I spent there, took place on a Sunday morning when she was the reader.

As usual, she put on a performance by charging up to the lectern at the front of the church. But on that day, she paused for a moment as she quickly scanned the verses she had been assigned to read. A look of equal parts disgust and confusion quickly came over her face. Then, within warning, instead of beginning with the usual introductory statement, "a reading from the Holy Gospel of ..." she blurted out "What the hell is this!?" She read the passage and stomped back to her seat in the congregation.

That girl came to my mind earlier this week when I looked over the scripture readings assigned for today's worship service. Upon reading the gospel lesson from Luke, my initial reaction was much the same as her reaction had been those many years ago to another passage from scripture. I read Jesus' words and wondered, "What the hell is this!?"

In today's gospel reading, Jesus preaches a message that is almost certain to provoke and puzzle us. He said, "I have come to set the earth on fire, and how I wish it were already blazing ... Do you think I have come to establish peace on the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division." Then he went on to describe fathers and mothers being divided against their sons and daughters, and mothers-in-law against daughters-in-law, and households of five persons being "divided, three against two and two against three."

What do you think about that portrayal of Jesus? What happened to the Jesus we are most comfortable with? The safe Jesus. The comforting Jesus. The reassuring Jesus. The encouraging Jesus. The peace-loving Jesus. Where did he disappear to?

The Jesus we are confronted with this morning seems harsh, angry, judgmental, threatening, even frightening. Today's impassioned outburst is from a man on a mission who is impatient for it to be accomplished. He oozes inner anguish. The fire he describes casting down on the earth appears also to be inside him, forcefully propelling him.

Five hundred years ago, the great Christian social activist St. Teresa of Avila was riding her donkey one day when she came to a stream. As she began crossing over the stream, her donkey became startled and bucked her off headlong into the cold water. Coming up out of the water breathless and shivering, Teresa looked up to heaven and yelled at God, "Do you always treat your friends like this?" Waiting a minute and getting no answer, the saint dragged her soggy self out of the stream and muttered under her breath, "No wonder you have so few friends."

After hearing today's teaching by Jesus, as he talks about bringing fire upon the earth, and causing division rather than peace, and breaking families apart, you wonder how he managed to have any friends at all.

In today's reading, we encounter a brutally honest Jesus who admits the potentially divisive effect of his presence in his followers' lives. There are some people, like you and me, who have made a conscious decision to accept the teachings of Jesus, both easy and hard, and do our level best, despite our flaws, to be his followers. There are other people, many other people, and I am sure we can all name some, who have made a conscious decision to reject the teachings of Jesus and turn away from him. And there is a third and steadily growing group of people, who simply are unfamiliar with the teachings and example of Jesus and who live their lives without knowing or thinking much about him at all.

We are fortunate because we are entirely free to believe in and to follow Christ, or not to believe in and not follow Christ, without risk or fear of social repercussion. Many people throughout the world today do not share that same freedom, and no doubt are appalled at how we take for granted our own freedom to choose to be Christian.

Will Willimon, an American clergyman and former university chaplain, tells of baptizing an international student from China who was studying in the United States. The young man had gone through a dramatic conversion experience, and he asked Willimon to baptize him so that he might become a Christian. This is how Willimon described the situation:

"I counseled the student before his baptism and made sure that he had a good understanding of the Christian faith and the questions that we would ask him during the baptismal liturgy. On a Sunday, we joyfully baptized him during our service of worship. I was proud of myself because I had assisted God in making a new Christian. After the service, I made a big deal of having the young man stand again at the baptismal font and have his photo taken. He seemed somewhat reluctant to have his picture taken. I attributed this to his shyness.

On the way out of the chapel one of his friends said, 'I don't think you will need to give him a copy of the photo to send back home to his family. They have assured him that if he gets baptized and becomes a Christian, he will never again be accepted into the family home. His family will disown him. Furthermore, his scholarship to the university is sponsored by the Chinese government, and once word of his baptism gets out, he is certain to lose all his funding to study here.'"

Willimon concluded his story by saying, "I thought baptism was a joyful occasion. So, I guess this young man's baptism was somewhat similar to what Jesus was talking about in describing his own baptism as a fire – a threatening, destructive, and devastating experience."

Now, let me clear up how appearances to the contrary, what Jesus said in today's gospel was *not* harsh, angry, judgmental, threatening, or frightening, and why my own initial 'What the hell is this' reaction to the reading missed the point.

The image Jesus created of "casting fire on the earth" is closely connected to the gift of the Holy Spirit. Recall that John the Baptist predicted that Jesus would baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire. In the Acts of the Apostles, the coming of the Holy Spirit to Christ's disciples is symbolized as tongues of fire. Therefore, Jesus' words about casting fire were not threatening and destructive, but refer to releasing the Holy Spirit and purifying people, purifying us, to be followers of Christ.

When we listen to Jesus carefully and truthfully, we encounter not a threatening God, but a God who is closer to us than we are to ourselves and who understands us better than we understand ourselves.

I was reminded of that this week when I read this reflection by Kate Bowler. She is a Christian theologian and author. She is also a cancer survivor, after being diagnosed with Stage IV cancer at the age of 35 in 2015. I would like to finish today by reading to you this letter that she wrote to her own physical body. I think her letter speaks to anyone who has ever experienced unwelcome changes to their body, and haven't we all? Her letter is also a welcome

reminder that the God we worship and who entered this world in the body of Jesus the Christ is always to be admired, never feared, always to be embraced, never rejected.

Bowler wrote: “Dear Body,

Sometimes, I hate you. You ache. You get tired sooner than I’d like to admit. You wake me in the night for no good reason. Your cells duplicate at unpredictable rates. New gray hairs and fine lines and silver stretch marks show up out of nowhere. You let me down just when I need you the most ... Sometimes, I want a break from living with you. I’d prefer to trade you in for a newer model. A model that is not in constant pain, that fits better in that pair of jeans, that has more energy. With you, I am limited—bound by skin and bone and thinning hair. With you, I am fragile ...

But God knows what it’s like to live in flesh ... If God lived in a body, then God knows the ache of growing pains and the feeling of goosebumps on a brisk day and the comfort of a warm embrace. Jesus felt the gurgle of a hungry stomach and the annoying prick of a splinter after a day of hard work. He wept over the death of a friend. Ours is a God who sneezed and rubbed His eyes when He was sleepy. Ours is a God who knew longing, heartbreak, excitement, frustration—the full range of what it means to be human . . . [and] to live in a body.

So when my own body drags me down, when my muscles ache, when my worries keep me up at night, when my fear for the future leaves me motionless, when I feel lonely and exhausted and burdened, I do not worship a God who is far off. Instead, I worship a God who is close by, who knows my humanity inside and out. God has counted every hair on my head and bottled up every tear I have shed ...

Dear, dear body, I get it. Or at least I am starting to. You do not have an unlimited supply. You run out, and I need to listen. Maybe I really should go to bed a little earlier or let you off the hook for craving those extra salty chips. I need to sense when you are struggling, and gently acknowledge that you are actually changing. That time and love and grief and life have worn themselves into my skin. Day by day. This is the beautiful, terrible evidence that we have lived.”

As I said, when we listen to Jesus carefully and truthfully, we never encounter a harsh, angry, judgmental, threatening, or even frightening God, but always a God who is closer to us than we are to ourselves and who understands us better than we understand ourselves. **Amen.**

10th Sunday after Pentecost

14 August 2022

Rev. Dr. Keith Fleming