

Did you hear that?  
Jesus talking about bringing “fire to the earth”?  
Not peace but division?  
Dividing mothers and fathers from daughters and sons?  
Calling people hypocrites?

I’m guessing this might be a little different  
from what you expected to hear.  
It’s certainly the opposite of what I usually preach,  
about a Jesus who brings people together.  
I preach – because that’s what I see in scripture –  
a Jesus who heals and shows mercy and reconciles.

So what, in God’s name, are we supposed to do with *this* gospel lesson?

It turns out we’re not alone in our dismay.  
One of my most trusted Biblical commentators calls these  
the most difficult seven verses in Luke’s gospel.  
Maybe I should’ve started my vacation a week early, huh?

But here we are, so let’s take a closer look,  
starting with the context of this passage.  
If you’ve been here much at all this summer  
you’ve heard me point out that we’re in a long stretch of Luke’s Gospel  
in which Jesus is literally going places.  
It’s sometimes called the “Lukan travelogue”.  
Where is Jesus’ ultimate destination? [*Jerusalem.*]  
What is he going to find there? [*The cross, among other things*]

As we’ve read week by week, Jesus spends most of this journey  
preparing his followers for what’s to come,  
teaching by example.  
He spends most of his time reaching out in love and mercy  
across social, ethnic and religious boundaries.  
He shows those who would follow him  
that he’s all about tearing down the walls between us,

and we should be too.

In previous weeks of reading from this section, we've had the opportunity to see how Jesus sends out "the seventy" to cover a wide territory with his message of love; tells the parable of the good Samaritan who reaches out beyond boundaries; enjoys a visit with the very different sisters Martha and Mary; and reconciles two brothers fighting over their inheritance. And that's all within the last month or so!

And, now, today's diatribe about division . . .

No, I don't think Jesus has suddenly changed his mind about everything he's said and done up to this point. This really is of a piece with all that's come before as it sets the stage for all that's yet to come.

Jesus is getting ever closer to Jerusalem and what awaits him there. By hanging on the cross, Jesus does create division even as he draws the whole world to himself. He does compel people to decide where they stand. He challenges them to take a risk for what they say they believe -- or else show themselves to be, well, *hypocrites*.

In today's gospel, Jesus is making sure the disciples are paying attention. That they know what they're getting into by following him all the way to Jerusalem.

I don't think Luke tells us if some of those who'd been following along drop out after hearing these words from Jesus, but I can certainly imagine it, can't you?

But the thing is, Jesus doesn't drop out. Back in Luke 9:51, Jesus set his face toward Jerusalem and, by God, he kept on going.

Jesus keeps going, by God,  
turning things *upside down* every step of the way.  
Welcoming the outcast and raising up the poor,  
knocking down the high and mighty from their thrones,  
just as his mother Mary sang in the Magnificat  
at the very beginning of Luke's Gospel.  
Jesus turns things *upside down* by inviting the stranger to dinner  
instead of building walls to keep them out.  
Jesus turns things *upside down*  
not as a Messiah who swoops in to make it all better,  
but as a Savior who *heals us* to work for justice and mercy in his Name.

Stirring up division is not the ultimate intent of Jesus' actions,  
but in this broken world that God so loves  
it *is* a natural consequence of his radical embrace.

I bet many of us have been watching the Olympics this week.  
Today's second reading, the epistle from Hebrews,  
offers the perfect "out" to any sane preacher who'd like to  
skip today's gospel  
and use an inspirational story from the Olympics instead.  
Did you catch that part near the end that bids us to  
"run with perseverance the race that's set before us"?

Too bad most of the track and field events are just gearing up.  
But I saw something in this week's swimming which seemed to combine  
both the Gospel and the epistle readings.  
It was a swimmer, captured in a photograph you may have seen,  
averting her gaze from the finish ahead  
to the lane beside her.  
She took her eyes off the prize for a nana-second and it cost her dearly.  
Someone commented that they knew in that instant  
she'd lost the race.

Today's gospel, for all its tough talk, assures us that  
Jesus never wavers from the path that leads to Jerusalem.  
He never wavers from his goal of showing God's sacrificial love  
for all creation.  
He challenges us to hold fast too, and he promises to be with us

no matter what, no matter how difficult, no matter how divisive.  
And Jesus gives us companions in faith, past, present and future,  
to struggle together,  
and urge one another on.

*Since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses,  
let us lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely,  
and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us,  
looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith,  
who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross,  
disregarding its shame, and  
has taken his seat at the right hand of . . . God. (Hebrews 12:2)*

**AMEN.**