

I'll begin with a subject you may have been talking about: the ELCA becoming a "sanctuary denomination." What does this mean? First of all, here's what it doesn't mean. When I talked with Bishop Gordy on Friday, he said that the choice of the word "sanctuary" was unfortunate. It gives people the impression that the ELCA is encouraging churches to harbor undocumented immigrants, which it is not. This also is against the law. I'll return to the subject of our being a "sanctuary denomination" later in this sermon...

In her book *Illuminated Life: Monastic Wisdom for Seekers of Light*, Joan Chittister shares the following story:

"Abba Lot went to see Abba Joseph and said to him, 'Abba Joseph, as far as I am able I say my little office, I keep my little fasts, I pray my little prayers, I meditate a little, I live in peace, and as far as I can, I purify my thoughts. What else can I do?' Then Abba Joseph stood up and stretched his hands toward heaven. His fingers became like ten torches of flame and he said to him, 'Why not be turned completely into fire?'"<sup>1</sup>

Sometimes it is easy to get the idea that following and serving Jesus is pretty tame: like Abba Lot, we say our prayers, try to stay out of trouble, and strive to get along with everybody. But sometimes we are reminded that the spiritual life is anything but tame; in fact, it can be downright fiery and dangerous. And if that fire catches hold of us, who knows what might happen?

Today's Gospel burns with this reality: it is a text filled with fear, fire, and foreboding. It invites conflict and division, rubbing it in our face. It is provocative, overloaded with machismo and testosterone, brazenly shouting, "Bring it on!"

If you crave a "gentle Jesus, meek and mild," you won't find much comfort in his words today. Jesus strikes a tough guy stance right from the get-go: "I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled!... Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division!" What a great text for Rally Day! Then Jesus tells us exactly how this will look: parents against children, children against parents, grown children against their in-laws, and their in-laws against them. In other words, Jesus tells us he has come to bring one big, hot mess. Who wants to hear such a Gospel? How exactly is this good news? Don't we have more than enough division and conflict already, as evidenced by the term "sanctuary denomination?" Good luck finding family

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<sup>1</sup> Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2000, p. 135.

values in this Gospel. I doubt you'll see these words cross-stitched, framed, and hanging on a wall in anybody's home.

Yet even so, we can see how true these words are. Jesus has brought fire to the earth: he has brought division. Many of our own families illustrate this truth, having plenty of diversity in religious life. Further, the family that Jesus himself created, the church, is not "one" and unified at all, as Jesus prayed for it to be,<sup>2</sup> but is splintered into hundreds, perhaps thousands of different groupings. Many of them have little, if anything to do with one another. These Christian groups themselves are often characterized by internal conflict. Of course, Lutherans wouldn't know anything about that, would we? So, yes: Jesus said he came to bring division, and boy did he ever succeed!

A Lutheran pastor and professor at Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota plays in a Christian bluegrass band. Once their band was asked to play for a beer and hymns gathering in a local bar. When they got to the bar, they were asked not to sing so much about Jesus. But the band members said, "Well, that's kind of the point of beer and hymns, isn't it?" That didn't go over well with management. The person in charge said some of their patrons didn't like Jesus music and fired the band.<sup>3</sup>

Jesus has been stirring up trouble for a long time now. In today's Gospel, he is on his way to Jerusalem, speaking of the baptism he is about to undergo. Jesus is talking about his suffering and the cross. He sees what's coming. It's clear to him where all of this is leading. He can see the storm clouds gathering. But he's not planning to run for cover. He has no intention to seek shelter.

This is not the first time Luke's Gospel has spoken of Jesus causing trouble: it actually began before Jesus was born. After the angel Gabriel told Mary she was going to become the mother of the Messiah, while she was pregnant, she went to visit her pregnant relative, Elizabeth. Mary told Elizabeth that God had turned the world upside down. As a contemporary translation puts it, God "scattered the bluffing braggarts. He knocked tyrants off their high horses, pulled victims out of the mud. The starving poor sat down to a banquet, the callous rich were left out in the cold."<sup>4</sup> Do we sometimes fail to hear how threatening these words actually may sound to people who are in power? They are words of rebellion - rebellion, by the way, is one of the meanings of Mary's name.

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<sup>2</sup> John 17:20-23.

<sup>3</sup> Luther Seminary podcast: Sermon Brainwave #676 Tenth Sunday after Pentecost.

<sup>4</sup> Eugene Peterson, *The Message Remix: The Bible in Contemporary Language* (Colorado Springs, CO: Alive Communications, 2003), Luke 1:51-53, p. 1864.

Several months later when Jesus was an infant, Mary and Joseph brought him to the Temple where he met Simeon. Simeon told Mary, “This child marks both the failure and the recovery of many in Israel, a figure misunderstood and contradicted...”<sup>5</sup> Here again is the message that Jesus will bring conflict.

Then, after his temptation in the wilderness when Jesus returned to Nazareth and spoke in the synagogue to begin his public ministry, he quoted from Isaiah: “God’s Spirit is on me; he’s chosen me to preach the Message of good news to the poor, sent me to announce pardon to prisoners and recovery of sight to the blind, to set the burdened and battered free, to announce, ‘This is God’s year to act!’”<sup>6</sup> The people in Jesus’ hometown initially were impressed with his words. But they soon became enraged. They tried to take Jesus out of town and throw him off a cliff. That’s because Jesus spoke of God’s grace and justice not just for them but also for outsiders, for foreigners. So Luke makes it clear from the very beginning of his Gospel that if people take Jesus’ message seriously, it’s going to cause trouble.

Usually, we view conflict negatively. We become fearful that people and institutions we love will splinter and separate under the tensions generated by conflict. Sometimes that does happen: but other times, groups are able to work through their disagreements and gain new insights into how the Gospel is good news and for whom it is good news.

As was mentioned earlier, at our Churchwide Assembly the week before last, the ELCA’s voting members proclaimed us to be a “sanctuary denomination.” One thing that means, according to a letter written by Bishop Gordy and signed by Bishop-elect Strickland, is “that the ELCA is publicly declaring that walking alongside immigrants and refugees is a matter of faith, not just politics.”<sup>7</sup> Bishop Gordy said Friday that what the Assembly intended to say was that we support asylum seekers, i.e., people who fear their lives are in danger in their home countries.

Throughout scripture in both the Old and New Testaments, the people of God are encouraged to welcome strangers. We try to do that on Sunday mornings at worship, and we try to do that during the week, too. When people ask us for help, whenever we can, we give it to them.

We also need to understand better how our church functions. As Bishop Gordy wrote last week, neither the ELCA “nor synods dictate to congregations how they

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<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, Luke 2:34, p. 1867.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, Luke 4:18-19, p. 1872.

<sup>7</sup> The ELCA Southeastern Synod, [cdavis@elca-ses.org](mailto:cdavis@elca-ses.org), Special Edition - Sanctuary Denomination, August 12, 2019.

are to live out their call to serve the neighbor.”<sup>8</sup> What we choose to do as congregations is up to us. At our Council meeting last Thursday, President Doug Hale and Pastor Museus Dabay agreed to work together in the days ahead to better understand what it means for us to be a sanctuary denomination and to interpret that to us.

One of the vows that men and women in the order of St. Benedict make is to live a life of on-going, daily conversion. This value is what is being proclaimed by Jesus to us today. Jesus says he came to bring fire to the earth. Fire changes, converts, and transforms things. It can be destructive, but it can also lead to new life and transformed energy for growth.

In Yellowstone National Park in 1988, a fire began with a lightening strike. Multiple fires eventually burned over 30% of the acreage in the park that summer. Initially, this was viewed as a disaster. But as the years went by, naturalists came to see this fire as a blessing in disguise. A few years later, eight times as many lodgepole pine seedlings had replaced some of the stands of trees that had burned. Often it takes fire to release lodgepole seeds. Controlled burns are now a routine part of forest management and stewardship. Dried out undergrowth is set ablaze before it becomes a threat to the entire forest. The ashes enrich the soil, which improves the entire ecosystem for plants and animals.

A stanza in the hymn “How Firm a Foundation” speaks to this dynamic in our spiritual lives. God tells us,

When through fiery trials your pathway shall lie,  
My grace, all-sufficient, shall be your supply.  
The flames shall not hurt you; I only design  
Your dross to consume and your gold to refine.<sup>9</sup>

Today’s Gospel calls us to be open to being transformed, converted, and changed by God’s presence in and among us. On this Rally Day, we are challenged to continue to be transformed by the word of God, allowing Christ’s healing, justice, and mercy for all people to flow through us.

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<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006), hymn 796.