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Wrestling with Fire — August 14, 2016

Scripture readings

- Jeremiah 23:23-29 — Let the one who has my word speak my word faithfully ... Is not my word like fire, like a hammer that breaks rock in pieces?
- Psalm 82 — Arise, O God, and rule the earth.
- Hebrews 11:29-12:2 — By faith ... 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.
- Luke 12:49-56 — Jesus said, "I came to bring fire to the earth, ... I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what stress I am under until it is completed!"

Sermon Notes

Modern day spirituality evokes concerns that it's shallow, lacking a certain excavation into the depths of our lives. Rather than a shallow approach to life, we need something that leads us deeper into relationship with God but also with the Spirit and with one another.

Jeremiah rails against the shallow words of the false prophets who speak their mind but do not speak the word of fire, the word of God. Their words help no one, bring no one into the light of transformation. Jeremiah knows that if the word of God is spoken, we are challenged and put in a place of pressure that makes something beautiful, like a diamond. "What has straw got to do with wheat?" What does velvet have to do with steel. God's word is like fire, like a hammer that breaks us into pieces, challenges us to be transformed, to go out into the world and get our hands dirty, to show love, and bring love to the people who need it most. We are not to simply talk about it or sit in a cave and call that spirituality.

The writer in Hebrews talks about a spirituality that faces the unknown realizing that what we are doing is bigger than we are. The people had to proceed in faith to overcome obstacles like the endless desert and the Red Sea. They had to go into that which they did not know, to be baptized by fire. They knew the next step required God's help, and if they were going to make it to the promised land they had to depend on somebody and something beyond their knowing. We are no different. We cannot live in the spirit of fear or deception. The compassionate side of God's love for us says, "You can do it, take the next step." We see in faith, in trust, that God has given us the way to go. We move into a world we cannot see, and we love those we don't even know yet. We face the unknown, not because of our small, meager faith but because of God's faith and the promise of life. That kind of spirituality brings us into freedom and into real life.

This past week we had a funeral for our oldest parishioner, Betty Eddy. We gathered to celebrate her life of nearly 99 years, to say our goodbyes, and to commend her to God. There's a certain challenge for us in knowing how to feel. We have lost one of our own, and yet she is now home, in the nearer presence of God. She no longer has to struggle to speak or to swallow, to receive communion. Betty's last work on this planet was to wrestle with death, to face death head on, with her family. She faced that which scares all of us. Yet in that battle, that wrestling, she found freedom.

The spirituality Jesus talks about is willing to face death. Jesus knows the Gospel of freedom is about facing that which scares us. If we can't face it, then we can't be free. So Jesus calls us

into the fire, calls us into that which can change us, calls us to confront all the things that would not allow us to be free, that would not allow us to be in open relationship with others, and especially with God.

One of my favorite authors and speakers, Vincent Harding, was an activist in the Civil Rights movement, a good friend of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr, and an African-American with a powerful spiritual presence. Harding coined the term, “dangerous spirituality.” which he said was about going out into the world wherever people are having a hard time living and offering ourselves to them. “Do something for somebody,” he said. Harding confronts the modern spirituality that says it’s enough for us to go into solitude and pray. No, he says, Real religion, real spirituality, belongs to the community. It belongs to the orphans, the poor, the marginalized, those who have been beaten or taken away from all they have ever loved. These are the people Jesus held in relationship with him, ready to confront their challenges. This kind of spirituality is tough because it gets us riled up. We prefer a spirituality that lets us transform ourselves “comfortably distant from the realities we are trying to grapple with.” We’d rather not go too far beyond the comfortable places, even in the name of transformation. Paul Bromberg says, “I want to be made new on my terms.” Vincent Harding and Jesus say, It’s not that easy.

Jesus was not afraid to stir things up. He came into the world jumping and shouting. “I come to bring fire!” Don’t you see? This is not some soft life we have here. You think the spirituality of your God and the death to which you are called is easy? No. The Jesus we see in Luke is not a soft Jesus. He is the one who says, “You want to live this life? Stand up, live in faith, depend on God for life.” There is no spirituality without wrestling with “fire.” We are to be transformed, to take the steps in faith towards what Jesus calls our “perfection.”

Jesus came to bring fire, but he didn’t come to burn anybody. Rather, he came to ignite the spark of love, the spark of looking out, the spark within our hearts that is life, compassion, caring. It is the spark that moves us toward that which we never knew we’d see. The Gospel of Jesus Christ is always about freedom, freedom from that which we can’t at the moment face. But with God’s help, we can overcome.

From 1st Corinthians: “We proclaim Christ crucified.” We proclaim that which is at the center of who we are as a spiritual people, that which saves us, and not just us but others as well. There is the fire, knowing what death is and walking with it — walking through it and accompanying those who are close to it.

Take-away

True spirituality is sometimes uncomfortable, but it is the real work of transformation and of life. When we face that which scares us, we are blessed by God and in turn we bless those we serve in brotherly love.

Vincent Harding: <http://www.onbeing.org/program/civility-history-and-hope/feature/dangerous-spirituality/536>

Paul Fromberg: “Behold What You Are” <http://www.theworkofthepeople.com/behold-what-you-are>
(Note: A subscription is required for “full screen” viewing but you can still view the video in “small screen.”)