

Saint Matthew's/San Mateo Episcopal Church

Pentecost 10, Proper 15, August 14, 2022

READINGS:

Jeremiah 23:23-29

Psalm 82

Hebrews 11:29-12:2

Luke 12:49-56

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Jesus said, “I come to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what stress I am under until it is completed! Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division!”

In today’s reading from Luke’s Gospel, Jesus goes on to say that even families will not be immune from the division that can result from his ministry. He has experienced that division himself. Remember, at one point his own family thought perhaps he had gone crazy, and wanted him to call everything off and come home!

I’m going to set the world on fire, says Jesus. Those who encounter the “radical rabbi” from Galilee are going to have to choose - his way or their own, and the choice will not always be easy, or “peaceful.”

Biblical scholar John J. Pilch is one of the resources I regularly use in preparing sermons. He notes that in Aramaic, the word translated as “earth” in today’s reading from Luke can also be translated as “earth-oven.” Earth ovens were the common stoves in Mediterranean villages. They were made from mud or clay, and burned dried camel-dung patties that had been prepared by drying and salting to make them burn better. Jesus, says Pilch, comes as a catalyst to “light the oven....He causes fires to break out, arguments to erupt, families to quarrel and become divided in their opinion of him. He urges his disciples likewise to be catalytic and to do the same thing he does.”

Episcopal seminarian Kellan Day writes: “The fire which Jesus brings is startling to the contemporary hearer.” Startling, in spite of the fact that the fire is a regular experience in our walk with the Lord. It cleanses our hearts from sin and worldly priorities. It comes into our

minds and renews our imaginations. It comes, Day says, “even into our family and political lives and changes them. The division that Jesus speaks about is temporary, an initial death. We lose ourselves and the things we thought were our true lives, only to find a spring of salvation, a baptism of healing, a Savior who gifts us everlasting life.”

Being a catalyst sounds like a lonely job, and a lot of work! It sounds like a really big responsibility, too! We ARE sent to make disciples of the whole world, to teach them everything that Jesus taught, but thanks be to God, we ARE NOT alone in our task. In our reading from Hebrews, we hear that we have a race to run. We are entered into that race when we are baptized. It is not a sprint – it is a marathon, and we have all kinds of company in the running. Other members of God’s family run it with us, and we even have a cheerleading section!

We learn from today’s reading that we are surrounded by a “great cloud” of faithful witnesses, so many, in fact, that Saint Paul tells us “time would fail” to tell of them all. The heroes of Old Testament times, those who held firm for the Lord Jesus through all kinds of persecutions, those who make our individual lists of favorite witnesses today – a “great cloud” of witnesses, indeed!

Many of my favorite witnesses are sitting right here in this room this morning! One is waiting for me at home.

My mom was a great cheerleader! She got the five of us kids up and into our “Sunday best” with our illustrated children’s prayer books in hand every Sunday morning.

My middle school band leader loved his students – so much that when I visited him years later in the old band room, he knew me immediately! “Hi Christie, did you bring your clarinet? Do you still have your horses? Is Tom (my brother) still playing his baritone?” He had fifty kids in his training band and ninety-five in his concert band every year, and had been teaching for over thirty, but he knew every one!

And my list goes on and on – no wonder “time fails” to tell about them all.

I know each of you have your own list. And all those witnesses, the dead and the living, are cheering us on as we run our race. They don’t care how fast we run. They don’t care if all we seem to do is fall down – get up – fall down – get up. They just point the way down the racecourse toward the finish line, and keep applauding every time we get something right!

Listen to this one: “A priest from the diocese of Maryland says, “I like to run. I’m not fast, but I enjoy running. Participating in marathons has given me an experience I have enjoyed about running. In marathons, the best runners in the world and normal mortals like myself get to compete in the very same race. I think that’s neat. I will never find myself on the same tennis court with Serena Williams. If I were ever to toss a football, none of the Green Bay Packers

would be there to receive it. But, when I ran the Chicago marathon, I (and 25,000 other runners) lined up at the same starting line as runners who held the best marathon times in the world. We ran the same course. We passed the same cheering crowds. But I suppose it's the finishing the really makes the difference. The elite runners were crossing the finish line when I was about halfway through the course. They had about two hours to enjoy refreshments and rest, while I still had about thirteen miles of one foot in front of the other to reach my goal, and was wondering if I would really make it. But the beauty of the event is that for many of us, just finishing the race is the accomplishment, the goal."

Finishing the race is the accomplishment. We don't have to be the best, or get across the line first. They also serve who fall down – get up – fall down – get up. It is not easy to stick with it, sometimes. Nobody told us it would be. "Take up your cross, deny yourself, and follow me," says Jesus to us. There certainly seem to be plenty of crosses lying around, waiting to be picked up! Expect conflict, Jesus warns, if you follow me, if you stand up for what is right. Don't let that put you off. The goal is his peace, the peace that "passes understanding," as our Rite I blessing puts it.

Whether Jesus has come to set the earth on fire, or to fire up the earth oven, he asks us to follow him, to be catalysts, to do the same things he does as we run our life's race to him.

So people of Saint Matthew's, follow Saint Paul's advice for marathoners! Remove and pitch all the "stuff" that weighs you down. Rely on the strength within, furnished by God. Remember the example of the "cheering section" who have run the course before us. Check out those fellow runners who surround us.

Oh, and keep your eyes on Jesus, who is the way, the truth, and the life! Our collect this morning reminds us to "receive thankfully the fruits of his redeeming work, and to follow daily in the blessed steps of his most holy life." The words to Hymn 654 in our blue hymnal are attributed to Richard of Chichester, and written way back in the early 1200's.

Day by day, dear Lord, of thee three things I pray:

to see thee more clearly,

love thee more dearly,

follow thee more nearly, day by day.

What a great prayer for all us "catalysts!"

Amen.