

Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Hebrews 11:29-12:2, Psalm 80, Luke 12:49-56
August 14, 2016
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A 10-year-old boy was failing math. His parents tried everything to get him to improve without success. As a last resort, they enrolled him in a Catholic school. From his first day at the school, the boy spent every night diligently studying and doing his homework. When the first grading period was over, he received an A on his report card in math.

His jubilant parents asked him what had made the difference. Was it the nuns, smaller classes or different textbooks?

The boy answered, "I admit I had never taken math seriously, but when I walked into that classroom and saw the guy hanging on the plus sign, I knew this place meant business." (Scott Bihl, *Readers Digest*, June 2001)

When we hear Jesus say, "I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled!" we know Jesus means business, too. A few in our Bible study groups last week didn't like this Jesus who seems angry, is stressed and brings division instead of peace.

In the familiar hymn we just sang is that confusing last verse which begins, "The peace of God it is no peace, but strife closed in the sod." (661 They cast their nets)

The context for this is all the verses which precede it. The disciples were once happy fishermen until Jesus entered their lives. They knew one form of peace until Jesus showed them another kind that they embraced even if it broke them. John was exiled and died on the island of Patmos, and Peter was crucified upside down.

This hymn was written by a man who fought in World War I and was highly decorated by both the French and the Americans. When William Alexander Percy returned from the war and opposed the Ku Klux Klan in his home state of Mississippi, he was branded a coward and a sissy. That's when he wrote this poem differentiating between the peace of God and the lesser peace of man. The peace of man is no real peace but accommodation to the norms of society, which may perpetuate all sorts of injustices, in this case, institutional racism.

Peace without justice is strife buried in the sod. But it will not stay buried forever. We know from the Jewish prophets and the history of our own country that God will not remain silent in the face of injustice.

The civil rights movement was a just cause, and we know how much divisiveness erupted. Jesus would say it was necessary divisiveness, much like we believe our own Revolutionary War was a

just cause even though at the time, rebellion against England had its critics. Someone has said, 'Every progressive spirit is opposed by a thousand voices appointed to guard the past.'

In our own day, there is considerable divisiveness and outcry. *Black Lives Matter* and *Washington Is Broken* are legitimate concerns. They are a crying out for greater justice, power and prosperity for every citizen in the United States. The great challenge for us, especially as people of faith, is to hear both these cries and take responsible steps to first understand and then work together to remedy them.

A very sad commentary on what is happening in some quarters of our country is that David Duke, a former grand wizard of the KKK, has decided that the conditions in our nation are now right for him to run for a senate seat in Louisiana. He is running on behalf of European Americans, in other words, white Christians.

A couple in our church was having a discussion about politics the other day, when one said to the other, "But we're not on the same side." I could have very well have said something like that myself in the context of a political discussion, but isn't this really the problem right now in our country. We are choosing sides because we have valid differences based on sincere personal convictions, but until we lay some of our differences aside and begin to be on the same side of wanting what is best for our country and God's world, we are all part of the problem. As long as we consistently blame someone else and don't accept our own complicity in our present problems, progress is doubtful. We all need to change some for any meaningful change to occur.

We're well aware of the forest fires that roar across the western part of the United States every summer. It is always tragic when families lose their homes to the wind-whipped flames, yet we know that forest fires are necessary. The fire that Jesus came to unleash, like a forest fire, is to burn away the old growth so that new life can emerge.

As much as some of us want to maintain the status quo or even go back to better days, life, like a river, doesn't ever stand still or flow backwards. It is always moving forward to remain fresh and renewed.

Jesus told Nicodemus, much to his chagrin, that he must be born again. Jesus tried to help his Jewish faith reform and be more inclusive. He wanted them to center their love for God in their love for neighbor rather than a strict adherence to rules and rituals. We know what happened to him. A fire finally engulfed him, yet God brought something new from his ashes – resurrection.

I hope you are watching the Olympic Games. I stay up too late every night and get very emotional. On the opening night, all the athletes from 206 nations, including a refugee

delegation, streamed into the Olympic stadium with an obvious spirit of joy, gratitude and celebration on their faces. Then a Brazilian marathoner ran in with the Olympic torch and lit the great fire for the duration of the competitive events.

This fire symbolizes life, truth and the regenerative power of flame. Those young athletes are living together and competing together in peace and respect without regard for any of the things that normally separate us. These young people are our best future and hope, and at least for two weeks, they exemplify the kingdom that God envisions for all of humankind. May the Olympic flame continue to burn in them and all of us well after the games are over.

Most of us don't like conflict or division and yet sometimes we have to risk it to stand up for Jesus and the just and fair treatment of everyone that he lived and died for. We want to be included in that cloud of witnesses that we heard about in the letter to the Hebrews and not settle for just any peace, but "for one thing – the marvelous peace of God." AMEN.