10th Sunday after Pentecost (L20C) – August 17, 2025 Pastor Chris Repp
Luke 12:49-56 Grace Lutheran Church, Champaign, Illinois

Grace, mercy, and peace to you in the name of Jesus Christ.
You may have noticed that all of my sermons begin and end with similar words each week. They are words drawn from scripture, words intended to remind you and me alike that my task here is to proclaim not my own words and opinions, not my own dreams, as Jeremiah says in our first reading, but God's word, God's message, the gospel of Jesus Christ. And the key to that message, that gospel, is a word that I speak in both my introduction and my conclusion every week: peace. Peace in the name of Jesus, peace that passes understanding, peace that is not my peace, not my idea, not my word, but God's. Yet here is Jesus in our Gospel reading this week making me look bad. "Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth?" Jesus asks. "No, I tell you, but rather division!" I know that's rubbing you the wrong way this morning. I can't be the only one. I know that because some of you have told me—and recently—that you come here for refuge from the storm that is raging in the world these days, the assaults on decency and norms and truth, even on the foundations of our democracy and our way of life. You look forward to one hour of peace that you are not getting in the rest of your week. And then here is Jesus, throwing a wrench into the works, "harshing your mellow," to coin a phrase. So what gives? What is Jesus doing with these unwelcome words?

To answer that, we need to go back to the beginning of the reading, to more unwelcome words, where Jesus tells us that he has "come to cast fire onto the earth." Now your first thought on hearing that might have been of the story of Sodom and Gomorrah from Genesis, where God rained down fire from heaven and destroyed those cities for their wickedness. Or maybe you thought of the lake of fire in the book of Revelation, into which the devil all the bad people were thrown. Jesus' words here in Luke have certainly been taken this way, to be talking about that kind of destructive fire. But if we look at the larger context of Luke, I don't think that that can be a faithful interpretation. Three chapters earlier, as Jesus was beginning his final journey to Jerusalem, he and his disciples passed by a Samaritan village that would not receive them, would not provide them welcome for the night. So the disciples ask Jesus if they shouldn't "call down fire from heaven" upon that village. They were thinking of Sodom and Gomorrah too. And do you remember how Jesus responded? He rebuked them. So do we imagine that Jesus now is regretting that rebuke, that maybe he's thinking he should have started the fire-casting back in Samaria as he and his group were left exposed to the dangers of the night? If not, and I think clearly not, then what could he mean?

We have to go still further back in Luke to another mention of fire, and then further forward, as we did last week, into Luke's second act, the book of Acts, to find a better solution. Early in Luke, back in chapter 3, we have John the Baptist talking about the coming of one greater than him, who would baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire. Then early in Acts we get the Pentecost story, when the Holy Spirit descends on Peter and the other disciples in tongues of fire, and Peter proclaims that Jesus' death at their hands was not meant to lead to their destruction, but instead to life. "Repent and be baptized," he told them, "so that your sins may be forgiven… and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit." This is not a message of destruction, it is a message of promise, of a new and different life. "The promise is for you, and your children, Peter continued, "…and for everyone God calls."

That gives us a different take on Jesus' fire-casting, doesn't it? Because not all fire is the same, not all fire is destructive. Not all fire is the fire that consumes forests and homes, the kind of fire that makes the news. Fire also cooks our food, warms our houses, powers our cars and

factories. It refines and strengthens metal and sterilizes medical equipment, destroying what is harmful and preserving what is good. In this Gospel reading before us, Jesus connects the fire he brings with his own "baptism," by which he means his own death. He himself will go through fire. But he is no robot. He will go through death for us and for our salvation, but that is no easy or comfortable thing, even for the Son of God. He goes with trepidation and anxiety, and he wants it to be over. He wants to get himself through the ordeal of his death so that he might blaze a trail for us to life, life that really is life, life empowered by the flame of the Holy Spirit.

Okay, that's fire dealt with, I think. Feel better? Maybe just a little? …But what about peace, and Jesus' seeming rejection of it here? We have to do the same kind of work with that as we did with fire – look at the broader context of Luke's writing. And when we do, we will notice peace all over the place. It bookends Luke's Gospel. The first thing the angel says, to Zechariah and to Mary, and then to the shepherds, is "do not be afraid," which is kind of like saying "peace be with you." But then the angelic host is explicit with the shepherds when they sing out "glory to God and peace on earth" at Jesus' birth. Then in the final chapter of Luke, the first words of Jesus to the disciples after his resurrection? Yep, "Peace be with you," he says. But peace also appears throughout the Gospel. Jesus sends away those he has healed with a word of peace. Peace is a sign of God's coming kingdom, shared with the villages the disciples are sent to. But peace is also misunderstood, misused, and just plain missed. As Jesus is heading to the cross, he weeps for Jerusalem because the people fail to recognize the "things that make for peace." And that is our clue for Jesus' troubling words here. Because there is true peace and there is fake peace. And we too often settle for the latter. The Romans were all about peace. They were known for it. It was their gift to the world. But the Roman Peace, the famous *Pax Romana*, was fake peace. It came at the point of the sword. It was peace that was built on oppression, on violence and coercion, on the exploitation of the many to benefit the few. It was peace that awarded citizenship to some, but kept the rest as outsiders, benefitting from their labor. If that's sounds familiar to you it's because we still are attracted to that model. And by we, I mean those of us who benefit from it and want to keep benefitting from it, and resist changing it because of what it might cost us. We're satisfied with peace that cracks down on crime but doesn't address poverty or racism, peace that rewards wealth and privilege with more of each, but leaves the poor and disadvantaged to fend for themselves, to pull themselves up by their own bootstraps. And we have all kinds of good excuses for why it just needs to be this way, and we'll go along with any lie that covers the shame of our brutal peace.

It's that kind of peace that Jesus rejects. Because that kind of peace only ends in destruction, for rich and for poor, for insider and outsider, and then cycles back into more of the same: fake, oppressive, destructive peace.

The fire that Jesus brings is not the fire of vengeance. It is not the fire of domination. It is the fire of truth and love—the fire of God's Word that purifies. It is the fire of the cross that burns away falsehood and pretense, and baptizes with forgiveness. It is the fire of the Spirit that empowers with care, humility, and self-giving love. And it is that fire that helps us resist and endure the destructive fires of injustice and hate, and to be instrument of the kind of peace that Jesus does indeed bring, peace that comes with truth-telling, forgiveness, and reconciliation, peace that is fired by trust in God's promise, and that burns in our hearts with persistent love and resolute courage. That is the peace that God greets us with today, and the peace that will send us on our way: peace that the world cannot give, peace that passes understanding. May it be yours, and mine too. And may that peace of God keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life that really is life. Amen.