

Sermon – Luke 12:49-56; Jeremiah 23:23-29
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Grace Lutheran Church
10 Pentecost – Year C
17 August 2025

“A Dividing Fire”

Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace be unto you and peace in the name God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. “Some biblical passages strike us as strange – until they don’t.” So writes pastor and professor Greg Carey about our gospel reading for today. His piece in *The Christian Century* continues: “Another day comes, and the same text we once set aside resonates with us in an unsettling way.” We hear Jesus’ words today in a new way. To be sure, the world has never been short on division, and we could all tell stories about how this or that second cousin ruined Thanksgiving dinner by talking about politics. But division? Deep division? It seems to be at an all-time high, within our nation, our society, and, yes, our families. Surely Jesus will come to smooth things out. We can sing a chorus of “Kumbaya” around the campfire and call it a night. But the campfire is out of control, and Jesus himself seems to be fanning the flames. In this world that is literally heating up by the moment, Jesus’ words today are hardly comforting. Fire and division, following the prophetic hammer of Jeremiah.
2. Division itself is, of course, lamentable. Can’t we all just get along? Surely this is the future God intends for us, and we wait in hope for unity. But unity is not a cheap hope, a thin wallpaper with which to cover up our problems as the walls themselves rot. Until this world’s fever is hushed and the new world dawns with Christ at the center as our all in all, we ignore divisions at our peril. Because here’s the thing: God chooses sides.

3. A few caveats: First, if you're absolutely certain that God is on your side, you're probably wrong. Unless you're talking about the Packers and the Bears, in which case God is obviously on my side. Beyond that, be on the lookout for a certainty that may be nothing more than smug self-righteousness. Second, yes, God loves everyone. Of course. Full stop. And third, no, God cannot be dependably aligned with this or that political party. So, what does it mean that God chooses sides? It means that God is always on the side of the oppressed, the marginalized, the victimized. Jesus stands with them. And it means that God is always against the oppressor, against those who would pervert God's dream, those who would bilk the poor and sow deceit for their own profit. And here, of course, is the thing. We are sometimes on one, sometimes on the other, side of the line. In the words of Soviet dissident Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, "The line separating good and evil passes not through states, nor between classes, nor between political parties either – but right through every human heart – and through all human hearts." As we welcome the comforting word that Christ brings to those in need, including ourselves, we also hear and heed his call to repent. Jesus Christ is the crisis of this world. He brings division, between new and old, death and life, calling us from the former into the latter. And when Christ calls, he asks not only that we open our hearts to him, but to those whom he brings along, the marginalized and oppressed among whom his cross is planted. Christ is calling. Will you stand with him, and for those with whom he stands?

4. This summer, our Grace mission team spend a day at Auschwitz-Birkenau, the complex of concentration and extermination camps in southern Poland. At the end of the train tracks, where death was dealt with both hatred and precision, a monument stands. In twenty languages reads the following: "For ever let this place be a cry of despair and a warning to humanity, where the Nazis murdered about one and a half million men, women, and children,

mainly Jews from various countries of Europe.” A cry of despair and a warning to humanity. I confess I am uneasy when too-easy comparisons to the Holocaust are made. The evil wrought by Hitler brooks few comparisons. At the same time, we ignore the cries of the victims at our peril, for what could happen once could happen again. So, a story: Maximilian Kolbe was a Franciscan Polish priest who was sent to Auschwitz because he was sheltering refugees. Several months into his imprisonment, there was an escape from Auschwitz. To discourage further such attempts, ten men were selected to be starved to death. One of them cried out, “My wife! My children!” Kolbe volunteered to take the man’s place and was confined to a starvation cell in Block 11, the so-called “death block.” From his cell, he led his fellow prisoners in prayer, calmly greeting his captors each time they entered. Still alive after two weeks, Kolbe was murdered by lethal injection. This past Thursday, on August 14, the church celebrated his feast day. Canonized in 1982, Kolbe was called the “patron saint of our difficult century” by Pope John Paul II. Kolbe did not choose the divisions of his time, but he chose which side of the line to stand on – the side of life, even if it cost him his own. It is the side of the line upon which Christ stands.

5. Jesus has always located himself among the poor and oppressed – breaking bread with them, healing them, and, as One of them, dying for them. In our day, will we follow this One in whose death and resurrection we have been baptized, from whom we receive life? We may not have drawn the lines (although we probably helped); neither can we wish them away. With humility in ourselves and charity toward others, will we work for what is true and good in the name of life? I pray we will. Let us hear Jesus’ words today, looking not for signs in the sky of what might one day come, but to the present moment right in front of our face. Seeing the present, may we do the right thing, trusting the future to God. Who knows what good may yet come? The man whose place was taken by Father Kolbe was a Polish soldier named Franciszek Gajowniczek. What happened to him? He survived Auschwitz. He

survived the war. He died in 1995 at the age of 93, 53 years after Kolbe saved his life. Do the good in front of you. You have no idea what God may make of it.

6. We would prefer a world without division, but here we are. I'm sure the Israelites would have preferred to go around the sea. Instead, God made a way. A way through, from slavery to freedom, from death to life, as the letter to the Hebrews reminds us. The God of Exodus is the Christ of Calvary, and this God still makes a way. You are not alone. We are cheered by a great cloud of witnesses. Christ who was dead is alive. Worry not for the future. Look to this present moment. Do the good that needs doing. Join Christ in his work. And if you're not sure where that work is found, it's where people are being hurt and victimized by those with power and privilege. For them, for each other, for ourselves, let us be signs of the Kingdom until the Kingdom comes. Amen.

And now may that peace that passes all understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, this day and forever. Amen.