

Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost August 19 2007—Luke 12:49-56

Each of us deep within the recesses of our minds probably has many different ways in which we picture Christ.

Perhaps we imagine Christ as the good Shepherd, we imagine Jesus sitting quietly among his beautiful white sheep, holding and gently caressing each one of them. We see him as the good shepherd knowing that he would risk life and limb to go in search for just one of the many sheep, should one go missing.

Perhaps one of the images from our memory banks is one that is not that different from the stained glass window behind me. One in which Jesus is surrounded by a number of children gently bouncing one on his knee and quietly telling all of them a story.

Or maybe you imagine Christ bursting forth from the tomb on Easter morning amidst the dazzling sunlight.

Or as the great physician telling a person who is unable to walk to pick up his mat and go home.

Our Gospels and Scriptures are littered with countless images of Christ. Jesus as the light of the world, as the bread of life. The Prince of Peace. The Lamb of God. The Messiah, Lord, and King.

I could probably spend all day recounting these numerous images and metaphors.

Probably some of the images that have not planted themselves deep within your memory banks are the images of Christ that our Gospel today puts forth. Images of Christ as arsonist, one who says” I came to cast fire upon the earth!”

You know what, I have yet to find a stained glass window or even a painting of Christ with torch in hand, ready to set the earth ablaze.

Or the image of Christ as disturber of the peace and home wrecker one who has come to sow division even amongst families.

Father against son, Son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother. And of course, the division we find so hard to believe mother-in-law against daughter-in-law and vice versa.

Somehow, mysteriously these images tend elude our memory banks. However, when we think about them something doesn't fit, they don't seem to square and the images stand in stark contrast with our most docile, peaceful images of Christ.

And yet we stand here having just heard the gospel and having to confront an image of Christ--- torch in hand ready to set the world ablaze.

I grew up in a family of firefighters. My grandfather was a call firefighter; my father became the fire chief of our small town and now is the deputy state fire marshal in Massachusetts. As well, my brother is a professional firefighter and I also have a sister whose house burned to the ground.

Through many of the stories and experiences I have had, I know very well the destructive and devastating nature that fire can have on the lives of people. When fire is unleashed and not controlled it can kill, maim, and ruin people's lives in a matter of minutes. It will destroy all in its path leaving nothing, but ash in its wake.

Perhaps this image of Christ with torch in hand setting the world ablaze is disturbing because we see fire as destructive and destruction seems to be contrary to how we understand Christ and his mission to this world.

We see Christ not as someone who destroys, but as someone building a kingdom.

We see Christ not as someone who divides people, but as one who brings people together, one who reconciles.

Unfortunately, the gospel writer Luke cuts us little slack and we are left to struggle--- to accept this image of Christ with torch in hand into our repertoire of the images of Christ that fill our minds.

During the summer months, the news agencies often bombard us with the stories of wildfires burning millions of acres of forest in some off far western state like Montana or California.

We are bombard with TV images of acres of forest burning uncontrollably, pictures of the efforts of helicopters and airplanes desperately trying to control the blaze by dumping huge amounts of water or chemicals onto the blaze from above.

Or images of smoke jumpers and firefighters cutting fire lines in the forest with the hopes that when the fire reaches that area the fire will burn itself out.

We hear about the devastation of millions of acres of beautiful forest as well as the economic devastation of homes that were destroyed when caught in the path of the forest fire and occasionally we hear the tragic news when someone is killed by one of these fires.

Often what we don't hear coming through our television sets is the importance that forest fires have on the ecosystem. Forestry experts tell us that forest fires are a healthy part of the life cycle of a forest.

Forest fires burn away tons of dead brush and undergrowth, and cleanse the earth allowing new life to begin. Within a short time after the fire, new life emerges and the forest begins to regenerate. Experts tell us that forest fires are essential for the regeneration of a forest.

Perhaps the fire that Christ brings into this world is not just a fire of destruction, but a fire where the ecosystems of our lives, our communities, and our churches are disturbed.

For when the fire of the gospel reaches out into the world, the world is at times disrupted and divided as the faithful struggle to embrace how the story of the Christ and his teachings affects their lives and **the world** in which they live.

The faithful wonder about what it means to live a life in a country at war while trying to look to a pacifist Christ who offers not retaliation as a solution but the turning of ones cheek.

The faithful wonder what it means to welcome the aliens among us as we struggle as a country with illegal immigrants.

The faithful wonder how do we reconcile a Christ who accept all at his table, even the tax collectors and sinners while we live in a church divided over issues of sexuality.

These question and many more like them tend to raise divisions and disruption, however, through these divisions and the conversations they can foster new life begins to appear, new understandings about God are found.

Some of our old understandings begin to pass away and new understandings begin to emerge. As well, some of our old understandings are strengthened and refined as new understandings are recognized as only fads which eventually fall away.

From the destruction of the fire that Christ brings, a new world is being regenerated and reborn where lives that have been disrupted by fire find new life, a life that is being drawn ever closer to God.

AMEN