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St. Paul's Episcopal Church
Text: Luke 12:49-56

Jesus and The Smokey the Bear Effect

Movement 1: Smokey the Bear Effect

This past week, Smokey the Bear celebrated his 75th birthday. Since 1944, Smokey has appeared on countless animated signs with the phrase, "Only *you* can prevent forest fires." NPR featured a story about Smokey that talked about his long career as a cartoon, fire-fighting animal.¹

The story talked about how, in the past few years, people have realized a problem with the ad campaign.

What we've unintentionally taught the country is that *all* fire is bad.

Scientists now call this the "The Smokey the Bear Effect."

The campaign has worked so well, that fires happen more rarely.

But the issue is, that when they *do* happen, they're especially destructive.

Years of brush and fuel have been built up to create unstoppable kindling.

Fire experts have embraced the practice of "controlled" or "prescribed" fires to cleanup forests and – ironically – lower the risk for more devastating, large fires.

But the problem is that people build their homes and towns close to forests,

And they don't support these controlled burns with the increase of smoke and potential risk of the fire getting out of control.²

So we're stuck with the "Smokey the Bear effect" and an environmental problem.

We need fire,

But it needs to be in moderation, and carefully planned.³

Movement 2: Gospel text

The idea of these controlled fires was sparked in my mind again this week when we turn to one of the most disturbing passages in either the New or the Old Testaments.

"I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled,"

Jesus begins the Gospel lesson for today.

¹ https://www.npr.org/2019/08/09/748836909/careful-with-those-birthday-candles-smokey-beloved-bear-turns-75?fbclid=IwAR1ne5h2YPELAellCKLYWMaikvmiEzIoN2_b92P-5d2Nv1LLTZMBp2YKuHE

² <https://www.npr.org/2012/08/23/159373691/how-the-smokey-bear-effect-led-to-raging-wildfires>

³ Thank you to Carol Ferguson, a colleague in one of my preaching peer groups, who pointed me to this NPR story and inspired the ideas to come (See more about Carol here - <https://carolhferguson.com/>)

Jesus' words scare me.
 They feel violent.
 He came to bring fire to the earth?
 That can't possibly turn out well for us.

I feel much the same about controlled fires.
 It makes me feel viscerally uncomfortable.
 What about all those trees?
 What about the habitat for all the animals?
 It doesn't feel like it could turn out well for us.

Jesus' disturbing speech continues when he asks the rhetorical question:
 "Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth?"
 I want to answer Jesus then and interrupt what'll come out of his mouth next.
 "Yes!" I want to interrupt –
 "Yes I think you came to bring peace,
 Because that's what I've been taught.
 That's what the angels said when you were born.
 You are the prince of peace, are you not?"

But before anyone could answer his rhetorical question, Jesus marches on:
 No, I tell you, but rather [I came to bring] division!"
 Father will be divided against son,
 And mother against daughter,
 And so on.

So that's it then...Jesus came to bring fire and division...
 It makes me uncomfortable.
 And it scares me.

Like so many of you, I've been steeped a long time in the southern and midwestern sensibilities
 of charm and "niceness."
 We've been taught that conflict is bad,
 Getting along is good.
 We have fewer and fewer examples of "healthy arguing" and "conflict."
 And so as a result of all this, many of us are "conflict averse" people.

Movement 3: Conflict in our lives – "controlled fires"

I wonder if there's a connection to be made today between Jesus' words and our collective fear
 of fire and conflict?

I wonder if we've fallen victim to some kind of "Smokey the Bear effect" in our personal lives?

Like with fire, we see any kind of conflict as *bad*.

Whether it's in our intimate relationships, our schools, or our churches,

We see a conflict brewing,
And some of us want to pick up and *run* the other way as fast as we can.

But what if, just like with our forest fires, we need to have some occasional conflict in our lives?
What if those arguments are the key to honesty in our relationships?
What if those clashes of interests are what our churches need to push through to the next place
God's calling us to go?

I don't mean we should all grab our metaphorical kerosene and set fire to our communities
through raging conflict.

I don't actually think that's what Jesus was getting at, either.

There are many ways to argue -

Some are good and healthy,

And some are insidious and toxic.

When Jesus said he came to bring division,

I think and *hope* he meant he came to bring *good, truth-releasing* conflict.

He came to help us release our pent-up tensions and hypocrisies in much the same way fire
experts set "prescribed burns" to help a biosystem thrive.

Movement 4: Jesus' ministry and Conflict

This Gospel can be especially hard to hear because it flies in the face of how many of us *like* to
imagine Jesus.

We talk about him as "gentle, meek, and mild."

As a good shepherd who gathers us into his arms and protects us from harm.

But a reading like we have today and a cursory glance at his career reveal a different picture:

Jesus was no stranger to conflict.

He was constantly finding himself in arguments with the keepers of Jewish tradition.

He would heal on the sabbath, eat with tax collectors, and cast out demons.

"Jesus also had a tendency to divide up families.

He starts his ministry as he's walking by the Sea of Galilee;

he calls James and John to just up and leave their father Zebedee sitting in a boat so that they
can come follow him.

He aggravates a rift between the sisters Mary and Martha by praising Mary's behavior and
criticizing Martha for being too busy.

Jesus refuses to even recognize his own mother and brothers when they come looking for him.
And he straight up tells people to leave their fathers and mothers, sisters and brothers behind
for his sake.

Even when Jesus does things that seem like they could only be good, he creates division."⁴

⁴ https://dayhefner.wordpress.com/2016/08/20/sermon-divided-we-stand/?fbclid=IwAR1ne5h2YPELAeIIcKLYWMaikvmiEzIoN2_b92P-5d2Nv1LLTZMBp2YKuHE

I could go on, but I think you get the idea.
 Read the accounts of Jesus' ministry and you'll find story after story of conflict.
 No one he encountered was left unchanged.

Movement 5: Conclusion

But Jesus wasn't the kind of destructive leader who left toxic conflict in his wake.
 Every encounter he had with people led them through division into a deeper peace.
 Imagine Jesus as a traveling "controlled fire."
 He went from town to town setting fire to people's "denial and dishonesty."
 As he burned through their complacency and their empty rituals,
 He introduced a "holistic, truth-telling, disinfecting peace.
 The kind of deep, life-changing peace that doesn't hesitate to break in order to mend,
 and cut in order to heal."⁵

So even though it's disturbing,
 and even though it's uncomfortable,
 Maybe we should take Jesus at his word today --
 That he came to bring fire and division,
 and that sometimes, we need to bring those forces into our own lives,
 Opening up a potential conflict in the same way we set a controlled fire -
 To heal what's broken,
 To make way for what's ready to come next,
 And to prevent a much, much larger problem later.

Maybe by letting go of the "Smokey the Bear Effect" – our fears of fire and division – we
 can begin to see the doorway opening to a deeper peace than we've been offered before.
 And maybe, if we go together, we'll have the courage to enter into that true peace that's
 beckoning to us...
 A peace that Jesus promises will lead to a truth that will set us all free. AMEN.

⁵ <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/lectionary-essays/current-essay?id=2305>