

## ***TENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST***

*Hebrews 11:29-12:2, Psalm 80; Luke 12:49-56*

Today's readings are full of hard sayings about faithfulness, and the promise of judgment. God is basically saying that behavior is important, that God has some very real expectations of us, and that what we do matters. So we hear Jesus' words about division, and about fire, about what He must undergo and His desire to get on with it. No gentle Jesus, meek and mild, no easy yokes or light burdens, no kind words about love and forgiveness. This is the other side of the Gospel, of our faith, the side that we don't willingly embrace. But there it is, and it is very much a part of the Christian message.

It is a message we need to hear it. We simply cannot ignore or overlook the reality that God offers us a vision of what human life can be, and what it should be. We pretty much know what that vision is. It has to do with shaping ourselves as people, by living faithfully with God at the absolute center of our lives.

It has to do with telling the truth and with living, not for ourselves alone, but for another. It has to do with holiness of life and with a genuine concern for the poor. It has to do with the way we take care of the stuff and the people God gives us.

What it all really comes down to is the imitation of Christ Jesus living His life again, in us and through us. God is very serious about this vision of life. God expects us to strive to conform our lives to it. When Jesus talks about fire, and about His baptism, and about division and conflict, He is talking about what it looks

like and what it feels like to struggle to live this way, to be faithful to the vision.

Remember in the Gospel when James and John were mad at a village in Samaria and wanted to wipe it out by calling down fire from heaven? Jesus said, “No.” Now, the very next time fire is talked about in Luke’s Gospel, Jesus says, “Yes.” But this time, the fire of God’s presence is not aimed at the bad guys out there, punishing them. Instead, the first one to feel that fire is Jesus himself. That’s the way it works. The fire that Jesus casts upon the earth is the fire that He first embraced. It is the fire of transformation and faithfulness; the fire that comes, not to destroy, but to refine and purify. And God’s first call is always to His own.

God’s first call for holiness and righteousness is not made to an evil world out there, telling it to shape up. God’s first call for holiness and righteousness is made to us, to those who claim to follow Jesus. It is after we hear and struggle with this call that we will have something to say, and, much more importantly, something to show, to a world that definitely needs to clean up its act.

It is important that we clearly understand something here. God does not give us this vision of how human beings should live, so that He can sit up there with a checklist keeping score on how we do and gleefully sending us to hell if we get too many wrong answers. And none of these warnings about behavior and discipline have to do with whether or not God will continue to love us. God’s continuous love, His gift of Grace, is a given, that is never at issue. Instead, there are at least two other reasons why God tells us these things about how our lives should look.

The first reason is that God loves us, and He wants for us the

fullest and the richest and the deepest life we can have. We are created in such a way that life is available to us most fully when we try to live God's vision of what it means to be a human being. It's a little bit like the old figure of speech which points out that cars are made to run on a certain kind of fuel. There are other sorts of fuel you can put in them that will work for a little while; and that can make for a very interesting ride, for a little while. But then it doesn't work any more. And it will wreck the car. So it is with God's vision for our lives. We just run better, for the long haul, when that vision is what we are using. We are made that way.

However, living as we are called to live, is not as easy as putting gas into the tank. It is sometimes very hard; and there are a lot of options out there. At the same time, the way we are created to live is not always the way the world around us says we should live. The values are different, and if we choose to hold on to the values and the vision of our faith, then we will know very well what Jesus means when He talks about division, and conflict, and fire.

Nonetheless, in that direction lies life at its fullest and its most abundant. God loves us, and God wants that life for us, and He has made us for that life. That is one of the reasons God gives us His vision of how human beings should live, for our own sake.

The other reason has to do with our mission to carry out the work and the ministry of Jesus Christ in this place, and in our generation. Part of our witness to the world is offering a real option, a different way to live. Jesus did that. The way Jesus lived, forced a choice upon everyone who met Him. Remember, Jesus did not grab people by the throat and say, "You're bad, bad, bad, and if you don't change you are in deep trouble."

Instead, He offered himself; He spoke of the Father; He told the truth; He lived with absolute integrity. People saw in Jesus something that has caused a crisis in them, and they had to choose.

For the world to see Jesus today, it must look at us. It does no good for us, or the church, for that matter, to sit on the sidelines and shout to the world out there that it is “bad, bad, bad.” Nor does it do much good to tell the people out there, exactly what they should do to clean up their act. Instead, we are called to transform ourselves; and to show and tell the world what it looks like, and how it is different to live as we are created to live, by a God who loves us, and wants for us the best that can be.

That is what is behind all of these tough lessons. It is the call to that wholeness and completeness and new life, that living as we are created to live can bring. It is also the call to share, not good advice, but new lives, with a world that is dying for the lack of exactly that. It is a challenge, and it is hard. But it is the way of life, and the way of hope.

**AMEN.**