

My Brothers and Sisters,

In today's Gospel, Jesus makes two radical statements. He tells us that he has come to set the earth on fire and that he has come not to establish peace on the earth but division.

Jesus goes on to say that because of him households, families, will be divided three against two and two against three. However, this seems to contradict what Jesus said at the Last Supper in John's Gospel, "*Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give it to you....*" [14:27]. How do we reconcile these two seemingly contradictory statements?

Jesus was using *peace* in two different senses: the absence of conflict and inner peace. Jesus does not promise absence of conflict. The division within families will be between those who choose to accept Jesus and those who reject Jesus, between those who choose to believe in Jesus and those who choose not to believe in him, between those who choose to be his disciples and those who refuse to be his disciples. The only peace Jesus promises is inner peace.

Jesus said, "*I have come to set the earth on fire, and how I wish it were already blazing!*" In Jewish thought, fire was connected with judgment. However, we can argue that Jesus came to set the world on fire with love. As we read in the Song of Songs, "*For stern as death is love, relentless as the nether world is devotion; its flames are a blazing fire*" [8:6]. The baptism with which Jesus had to be baptized was his death on the cross, which Jeremiah's sufferings in the Old Testament prefigured and which, according to Hebrews, Jesus endured "*for the sake of the joy that lay before him.*"

As Christians, we sometimes think that God willed that Jesus die on the cross to atone for our sins. Jesus was God's beloved Son. God did not will that Jesus die on the cross. Rather he wanted Jesus to atone for our sins by loving perfectly. It was because Jesus loved perfectly that he was put to death. He died for love. Herbert McCabe wrote, "The openness of love becomes the vulnerability of the victim...the Son of God did not come to us in order to be crucified, but since he comes to be a totally loving, totally human being, it was inevitable that he would be crucified."¹

As disciples of Jesus, like Jesus, we are called to set the world on fire with love. If we want to set the world on fire with love, it will not be by simply loving family and friends. We will set the world on fire by loving and doing good to our enemies. Jesus said, "*Even sinners love those who love them...But rather, love your enemies and do good to them, Be merciful, just as (also) your Father is merciful*" [Lk. 6:32, 35-36]. Likewise, we will set the world on fire with love by meeting the needs of our least fortunate of our brothers and sisters: "*For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, a stranger and you welcomed me, naked and you clothed me, ill and you cared for me, in prison and you visited me*" [Mt. 25:35-36].

My brothers and sisters, setting the world on fire with love, especially by loving our enemies and meeting the needs of the least of our brothers and sisters, is a tremendous risk and makes us very vulnerable. However, Alexandra Kovats wrote, "Our choice as human beings is not between pain or no pain, but between [the] pain of loving or not loving."²

¹Herbert McCabe, *Law, Love, and Language*, (London: Sheed and Ward, 1969), p. 133.

²Alexandra Kovats, "I Want to Live: Youth and Spirituality," *Youth Ministry Resource Network Occasional Paper #9*, (Naugatuck, Connecticut: Center for Youth Ministry Development, 1986), p. 8.