

“Brother Fire”

Exodus 13: 17-22; 1 Corinthians 3: 10-15

This is probably as close as I will ever get to preaching a hellfire type of sermon which seems appropriate since we are talking about Brother Fire today. But even this hellfire sermon will fall short according to some people's standards. I need to tell you that I have never really claimed to be a fire and brimstone preacher by any means. Because, well, if I'm being truly honest, it's because I don't like using that word, "judgement" when it comes to our faith. The word "judgement" makes me so uncomfortable that I rarely ever consider using it. For me, for us as Disciples of Christ, it is so much easier to talk about grace, to talk about love. It is so much easier to talk about God's welcome which we all experience as we gather around God's table. But judgement...you'll find that I am pretty quiet about it. And I have come to realize that this is to our own detriment that we don't talk about judgement in this church.

Here's why I say this. When we neglect to say, when we refuse to say what we think or believe about judgement when it comes to our faith, we have actually done more harm than we even realized. In our silence about this part of our faith, we have allowed others to hijack our story as followers of Jesus Christ. And believe me, they have no problem speaking out about the issue. They are speaking

really loud. Sometimes they are the only voice people hear when it comes to the character and nature of God and in doing so, they are giving the wrong impression about our God.

Now before we all assume what I'm about to say, let me just go on and say it...I fully admit that judgement is a large part of our story as people of faith. I would never ever deny that there is not story after story in our Bible that deals with judgement and how it is handed down on people of God. If I did that, I would be ignoring a good part of the prophets and their message. It seems like every time a prophet got up to speak, it was usually about condemning the people of God to some outer region where there would be wailing and gnashing of teeth. I will also say that usually the prophets' best way to bring about this judgment was with some fiery event that had the power to destroy everything in its midst. Judgment is a part of our faith story. Judgement with fire also is a part of our faith story as well.

However, people still try to get around this by saying, Well that's the Old Testament. In the New Testament, that doesn't happen. Um, yes it does. Even Jesus throws in a little fiery judgement when he was talking to the people. Jesus says in the Gospel of Luke, "I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled!" Not exactly what we expect from Jesus. He fully acknowledges that the day of the Lord is coming when the sheep will be separated

from the goats and the unrighteous will find themselves in a fiery outer ring where there will be eternal punishment.

So please hear me say that I am not denying that there is judgement as part as our faith story. I'm just admitting that probably like all of you I'm uncomfortable with it. I would rather skip over that part and get to the good stuff, you know that promise of God's Kingdom coming.

But we can't get to that promise of God's Kingdom being fully realized here on Earth until we deal with this whole judgement thing. So this Sunday as we invite Brother Fire to be our guide along our Lenten Journey, I want us to take another look at it and how judgement fits into our wider faith story. To do that, we need to remember that our stories as people of faith are always part of a larger context and conversation. Case in point....one of the stories we probably remember most when it comes to judgement and fire is from John the Baptist. Now if you want a fire and brimstone preacher, he was a fire and brimstone preacher. A little crazy with the eating of the locust and the wearing of camel's hair but definitely a fire and brimstone kind of preacher.

John the Baptist tells the people, "Today, I'm baptizing you with water but another will come who will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire". He then goes on to say, " You brood of vipers, this messenger of God's winnowing fork is

in his hand and he is ready to clear the threshing room floor. He is ready to gather the wheat in but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire”.

See I get it...judgement with fire. I'll admit it.

But once again, we need to remember that these lines are not all there is to this story. It is part of a larger context and conversation. Right before John the Baptist says these lines, he reminds the people that it is not enough to say, “Well, I’m a child of Abraham. I can do whatever I want and still be okay in my relationship with God, almost as if that whole child of Abraham thing was a get out of jail free card....

Um...no. That is not how this whole relationship with God works. So John reminds the people again that it is not enough to say we are called children of Abraham, it is not enough to say we are called children of God, it is not enough to say we are created in the image of God and think that absolves us of everything, to think that these words make everything okay. Yes, we are children of God, yes we are made in the image of God and yes they are great life-giving things but they call to more, to be more, to show and share God’s love more. When we claim these things as our true identity, we become responsible for our actions and for our words. As ones who are claimed and named as beloved children of God, we are responsible for how we treat others.

John is reminding the people again, just like all the prophets who came before he did time and time again, John is reminding the people that what we do matters. Our words and our actions represent us, but not only us. They also represent God. How we treat others, how we speak others, how we interact with others, represent our God. They reflect the nature and character of our God. And God is getting a little tired of people reaching the wrong conclusions based on the words and actions of God's followers.

Just look at our world today. People hear the church talking about how God is full of love, how God is full of grace yet we treat each other with disrespect and hatred. As people of faith, we say that God is a God of abundance yet there are children going hungry, right here in our own community. We say that our God is a God of welcome yet too many times we have put boundaries on who is and who is not worthy of God's gifts.

I think it is safe to say God is getting pretty tired of looking around this world and seeing how we treat each other, seeing how we treat the world around us, I think it is safe to say that God is getting pretty tired of looking around and seeing God's followers failing to stand up for the least of these. People are getting the wrong impression about who God is based on the actions, words, and interactions of the ones who say we are claimed and named as God's own.

It's about time we stop it. It is time we started acting like the people God created us and called us to be. And that's where Brother Fire comes in.

I want us to take another look at our text from first Corinthians. In these few lines, we see Paul talking about how God's fire will come and "test what sort of work each one has done". Once again, I'm not denying that there isn't judgement with fire. Fully admit it. But I would argue that that judgement is not all there is.

I want us to put this Scripture in context. Take a look at verse 15. "If the work is burned up, the builder will suffer loss. The builder will be saved but only through fire." This is literally the saving grace for the group in Corinth. He is telling them their work will amount to nothing on that last day if they do not use the very best to build up God's house, if they do not use their gifts fully to share God's kingdom. Paul is saying we are to remember who we are and whose we are and always act from that understanding. And here is what I love...Paul says even if we miss the mark, God is still going to give us grace.

In this text, Paul is not trying to scare them into obeying God because let's face it, that never works. No one wants to worship God out of fear. No one wants to worship God, always worrying what is going to happen next if we fail. That is not how God operates...but that is how the world operates.

The systems of our world are designed to oppress and confine people. The systems of our world are based on creating an atmosphere of constant fear and worry. Our world thrives on a system of retribution. Its motto is an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. And what has happened: We have a world full of people who cannot see. That's how the world works but that definitely is not how God works. Our God is a God of love. Our God is a God of grace. We know this. Time and time again, it has been proven to us. Time and time again, we have experienced it in our lives. We have been show the grace and love of God in our lives constantly.

This is why I fail every time I try to be a fire and brimstone preacher. My starting point, our starting point as people of faith is always and should always be God's grace and God's love. I've experienced it too many times to start the conversation anywhere else.

So everyone is probably wondering if I don't deny judgement in the Bible and my starting place is always God's grace and love, how do I reconcile what seems to be two totally separate ideals?

Well, it comes back to Brother Fire. When we look at Paul's conversation with the group in Corinth, he doesn't encourage them to only focus on fire's power to destroy. Rather, he invites them to see the Kingdom of God in their midst and focus on fire's power to transform, on fire's power to refine. Paul wants them to

focus on fire's power to fashion them into the community of faith God created them and needs them to be....a community of integrity, a community that reflects God's grace and God's love in all they do and say, no ifs and or buts.

You see, where others use the word "judgement", I use the word "accountable". I say that the Word of God hold us accountable. It holds us accountable for our words and actions. It hold us to a calling for how we are to live our lives, for how we are supposed to interact with all of God's creation. And I'll fully admit it is hard. There have been moments when that whole love your enemies thing has been hard and I would rather not do it. But as a person of faith, I know that I don't get to pick which Scriptures I'm going to follow and which Scriptures I'm not. Jesus didn't say Love your enemies except...and then give us permission to fill in the blanks. It says Love your enemies. Period.

I fully admit this is hard for us. This is not natural for us. We would rather show and share God's love with people who think like us and act like us. That's why we need Brother Fire to come along. With the help of Brother Fire, we are molded, we are fashioned, we are transformed into the people God created us and calls us to be. With the help of Brother Fire, we have our hard hearts softened.

Now for some, they would say that Brother Fire is harsh and painful, having only the power to destroy. But I think Brother Fire gets a bad rap. St. Francis tells

us he is beautiful, and cheerful. He is power and strong. Brother Fire is the one though whom God brightens the night and guides the people of God. I say that it is through Brother Fire that we are transformed and become lights of love for all of God's creation.

Here is why I say this. Take a look at our Exodus text. In the very first lines, we know all we need to know about our God. "When Pharaoh let the people go, God did not lead them by way of the land of the Philistines, although that was nearer; for God thought, "If the people face war, they may change their minds and return to Egypt." Let me say that again: "If the people face war, they may change their minds and return to Egypt.

I think it is pretty safe to say that if God really wanted to smite God's people and destroy them in judgmental fire, then all God had to do was leave the Israelites to their own devices. After all, we read on and see that they were ready for battle. They were ready for war. They could have ignored God's guidance, taken the direct route, and gone into a battle. They could have been hurt, maybe even some killed. The people were ready for war. They could have ignored God's guidance and charged into death and destruction. Then they could have decided given all that, that it was better for them to return to Egypt. Egypt... You know the place where they were slaves, you know the place where death and darkness was all around them. God realized that the people would choose fear, would choose

oppression if God didn't guide them into new life. So, let's be honest, if God really wanted to smite the people of God, they probably could have handled the details of destruction on their own. But that's not what happened. God guided them on a new way.

God lead God's people to the promise land another way, never leaving their side. God was with the Israelites by day as a pillar of cloud and by night as a pillar of fire. It may not have been the easiest way to get to the promise land. It may not have been the most direct way. But it was the way that brought the people safely into the promise land. And along the journey they were transformed, shaped, refined, fashioned into the people God created them to be, into the people God called them to be, and yes even more important, into the people God needed them to be...a people of integrity, a people of grace, a people burning bright with God's love in their hearts.

I have to tell you before this sermon, I didn't know much about what it takes to refine a piece of metal. You know the process where a piece of metal is place in the fire, and it comes out glowing red. At this point, the metal is soften and the artist is able to work with the material, stretching it, molding it, shaping it, forming it into whatever design the artist needs it to be.

I'm not going to bore you with the details of the process. You can all google it when you get home. But there are a few things that I want to share with about the process. Did you know fire is the best way to purify gold? The process of refining the gold removes what is call dross, all the stuff that prevents the gold from really shining through, the stuff that prevents the gold from being what it was created to be. I found a story where someone had asked an artist how he knew when the process of refining, the process of purifying was complete. And I love this answer...The artist said, "When I see my own image reflected back in the gold." Then the person asked the artist, "Well, aren't you worried that the process might destroy the precious gold? To which the artist replied, "No because I sit with my eyes staring fixed on the fire for if the time necessary for refining, for transformation is exceeded in the slightest degree, the gold would be injured. And I would never to that to my creation."

Sure, I'll admit that there is judgement in our stories of faith but I would argue it is not about fire and brimstone. It is not about fear and pain. It is about accountability for being the people God created us to be. Through the fire of God's love, through the fire of God's grace, we are being transformed. God is refining us removing whatever keeps us from being all that we are meant to be, what God needs us to be. It has always been about God shaping us into a community of faith based on integrity, respect and compassion. It has always been and continues to be

about God fashioning us into people who become a reflection of God's own image that not only we can see in ourselves but so that others can see in God's image in us as well.

I fully admit this process of transformation, this process of refining may not be the most direct way. And yes, I fully admit it may not be the easiest way. It may mean that we need to break our silence and take back our story. It may mean that we need to practice what we preach. It may mean that it is going to get a little hot in here and we feel the flames a bit as we speak out against the injustices that fill our world.

But remember, our Creator is watching the fire as it refines us, as it purifies us, so that it doesn't injure us or destroy us. The way of Brother Fire is a way of hope and new beginnings. It is the way all creation will experience healing and wholeness. It is the way that leads all of God's people to freedom.

God's way of transformation through Brother Fire is the only way that will lead all of us out of the darkness and fashion us into lights burning bright with God's love for all the world to see. Amen.