

"I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what stress I am under until it is completed! Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division!"

Well then! What happened to our Prince of Peace? Did he get up on the wrong side of the bed? In this passage, it certainly sounds like he has come to the end of his rope. No more Mr. Nice Guy.

For the past several weeks, we have been following Jesus on his way to Jerusalem. He knows he will not be welcomed with open arms. In fact, he knows that he will be walking right into trouble. The closer he gets, the more desperate he is to ensure that his followers understand his message. You can hear the desperation in his words. But this seems different somehow. This almost sounds like a complete about-face!

That just doesn't make sense to me.

It's tempting to write this off as Jesus having a bad day, as Jesus cracking under the stress of his mission... but I wouldn't be happy leaving it there. No matter how stressed Jesus is, I can't believe he would completely give up and change his message from hope to fire and brimstone... That's not the Jesus we know. That's not the Jesus we follow... and I'm not willing to believe that Jesus would give up on that vision of God's kin-dom here in this earthly world, no matter how tough things got. The rest of the story proves that. He was willing to take the worst torture imaginable, to die by crucifixion, rather than give up on that vision.

And so, actually, I don't think he is changing his message. Peace and harmony are not off the table... they just aren't going to be bestowed on us like a Christmas gift. Peace and harmony are the *goals* of building that kin-dom that God so wants us to have – but the point that Jesus is trying to make, I think, is this: we can't get there without a lot of hard work and pain first.

Jesus may not have been this forceful before but he has often said that following him will not be easy – but do these followers really get it? ... Do we?

We can talk about creating the kin-dom till the end of time, but if we don't actually do something more than talk and dream, that end of time will come and nothing will have changed. Change is what is needed and change is hard work... change can be scary work... In order for it to happen, it often involves a whole lot of disruption first. Much of what exists needs to be destroyed before we can start building anew.

“I came to bring fire to the earth!” he says. Well, fire can do one of two things to what it touches: it can destroy it or it can purify it. Either way, fire isn't something you can ignore. Either way, whatever it touches is not going to be the same... and on this day, he wants to get that fire kindled!

“Do you think I have come to bring peace to the earth?”, he asks, “No, I tell you but rather division!”

Jesus isn't about to wave his hand and make the world suddenly peaceful. He's here to stir things up! He's here to take your worldview and turn it upside down! Yes, he is talking about a world where peace and harmony reign but he also knows that this isn't going to happen without ticking a few people off first. He's not here to make friends. He's here to bring people to their senses. And he knows it's going to be messy. He knows that it's going to cause division, even among family members. Think about it... every time Jesus calls someone to follow him, he tells them they have to leave everything behind – material things, yes, but also relationships. In order to follow Jesus, you need to decide that anything or anyone that distracts you from the mission to bring peace and harmony to this world has to be left behind – including people who would try to persuade you to sit back, be safe, and let someone else do the dangerous work, maybe the very people you love.

I don't think there is a single person on this planet who wouldn't wish for peace. Even those who seem bent on causing war and violence think they are doing it to bring peace of some sort, even if it is just peace for themselves. I also don't think there is a single person on the planet who wishes for its destruction or who doesn't wish that what is happening to creation because of climate change would stop... but there are few who are strong enough and brave enough to get out there and do the hard work... the uncomfortable work.

Change certainly begins with a vision and a plan, but nothing happens until those plans get put into motion.

That's the messy part.

That's the hard part.

Jesus is trying to light a fire under these folks! He knows his time is limited. It's time for them to put their money where their mouths are...It's time to get to work.

And if Jesus was frustrated with the folks of the first century, what would he make of *us* two thousand years later?

I have a feeling he would be giving us the same speech...

You know, I think Jesus would have liked Greta Thunberg. We haven't heard a lot about her recently but she was prominent in the news a short time ago. She is definitely someone who believes in fanning the flame! A young high school student from Sweden who, at just 15 years old, started staging her own school strikes to wake up the Swedish government about the crisis facing our world if it doesn't step up its efforts to cut carbon dioxide emissions. She began by spending every Friday on the steps of the government instead of going to school. One year later her voice had travelled well beyond the borders of Sweden. At sixteen, she became a well-known name internationally. She has given a TEDx talk, she has spoken at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland; she has spoken at the international climate talks in Poland, she has spoken to the British Parliament and she has spoken at the UN. She met with Obama and with the Pope. She attended anti-coal protests in Germany. She traveled the world, keeping to her ideals and following her own advice – by bicycle through Europe and even on a bare-bones sailing vessel across the Atlantic. She has inspired students all over the world. She has inspired adults as well.

This is a young girl who is dealing with selective mutism and obsessive-compulsive disorder. She has suffered severe depression, an eating disorder, and brutal bullying. She is on the autism spectrum... Of all the people in this world, of all the children in this world, she would not appear to be a likely candidate for such a mission. Can you imagine the courage and conviction it took for her to step into the limelight? Can you imagine how hard it was for her to move out of her comfort zone and use her voice – the voice she has trouble using at the best of times – to wake people up to the crisis that is facing our planet? Her fire has certainly been kindled and she is using that spark to fire up the rest of the world.

The media hasn't given us a lot of new information about Greta Thunberg in the past couple of years. Other stories have moved to the forefront since she first used her passion for the earth to kindle a fire under us all. But she is still fanning that flame. In October, she will be headlining the London Literature Festival where she will launch her project, "The Climate Book". In this anthology, she has compiled essays about the climate crisis from 100 leading scientists, experts, authors, activists, and storytellers. This isn't just a book launch though; the festival itself is dedicated this year to the topic of climate crisis, with a whole series of events around that issue. Greta is still very much fanning the flame.

And the passion that sparked her action is spreading to others. In Germany, a group of young people calling themselves the "Uprising of the Last Generation" recently stuck themselves to a roadway with super glue to draw attention to the fact that we have only a few years left to turn the wheel around and avoid catastrophic levels of global warming. Lina Schinkoethe, the leader of the protest is a disturber. This kind of protest gets people upset! She says, "If we wanted people to like us, then we'd do something else, but we've tried everything else. We've asked nicely. We've demonstrated calmly." Lina and her group know that they need to light a fire under people. "We need to generate friction," she says, "so that there's an honest debate and we can act accordingly. What we're doing is illegal; at the same time, it's legitimate." The Uprising of the Last Generation is doing their best to fan the flame.

I think Jesus would have really liked Greta Thunberg and Lina Schinkoethe and the other young people who are disturbing us., young people who realize that sometimes the best way to get people moving is to make inconvenience them... to make them angry.

In fact, the last part of the scripture we heard this morning sounds much like what these young people have had to say...

“When you see a cloud rising in the west, you immediately say, ‘It is going to rain’; and so it happens. And when you see the south wind blowing, you say, ‘There will be scorching heat’; and it happens. You hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present time?”

Those are the words attributed to Jesus 2000 years ago. This is Greta Thunberg today:

“I think in many ways that we autistic are the normal ones and the rest of the people are pretty strange. They keep saying that [climate change](#) is an existential threat and the most important issue of all. And yet they just carry on like before.”

I have no idea if she is a Christian or not, but I do know that Greta gets what Jesus was talking about.

In today’s passage from Luke, Jesus seems to think his audience doesn’t get it... Do we?

We are followers of Jesus. We live in hope of a better world – a world where there is peace... a world where everyone’s needs are met, a world where all of creation is sustainable. Jesus gives us this hope. He says it’s possible... He shows us how it can be done... This hope is one of the hallmarks of Christianity...

We can’t afford to give up this hope... and we can’t afford to stand by and wait for someone else to put the plan in motion. We need to be willing to get uncomfortable... and, boy, that’s a hard message for people like us, people who live in luxurious comfort compared to many in our

world. I think, truly, that it is easier to be an activist if you are living on the margins than if you are enjoying the luxuries of life. It could be that the issues are more visible when you live on the margins of society...or perhaps when you live on the margins you simply have less to lose...

But perhaps when you live a privileged life like ours, you have the greater responsibility...

In last week's reading from Luke, Jesus began his wake-up call. "Don't be afraid." Remember this? I choose to read it as, "Don't be afraid! Just stop it!"

As we continue this week, he challenges us to use that new-found courage to do something that will make his vision of the world a reality. If Jesus had access to Facebook, I think he'd be saying, "It's not enough to 'follow' me... I don't need a lot of 'likes' ... I need you to get up from the virtual reality of your computer screen and get out there to make a difference in the real world!"

To put it in other words, we need to do more than *go to* church... we need to *be* the church.

Maybe you have seen the poster from the United Church of Christ, our partners in the US. It lists ways we can do just that – Be the church:

Protect the Environment

Care for the poor

Forgive often

Reject racism

Fight for the powerless

Share earthly and spiritual resources

Embrace diversity

Love God

Enjoy this life.

It's a great place to start if you are feeling helpless or too small to make a difference. There is something on this list for everyone, I think.

This is a message that Bells Corners United Church takes seriously. We can be proud of the work being done by this congregation. Our Service, Outreach, and Social Action Committee (SOSA) is a dedicated group involved in FAMSAC and Refuge NOW and the Ottawa West End Community Chaplaincy (or OWECC). They are involved in Multifaith Housing and Bridge Building with our Muslim neighbours from the Jami Omar mosque... Our young folks are involved in outreach projects beyond our borders – in places like Nicaragua and Zambia... Our Pastoral and Spiritual Care Team visits shut-ins and those in hospital ... There is a lot happening that you could get involved with right here in this church. As September approaches and we start thinking about fall activities, is there something happening here that you'd like to be part of? Is there something not happening that you'd like to get started? Is there a spark that needs fanning into a flame?

With all the distressing news in the media today, it's easy to lose hope. It's easy to get overwhelmed. Jesus shows us time and time again that there is room for hope. However, he also wants us to see that hope is a verb – and it's not a passive one. It requires action. Hope is

the spark that we use to kindle the flame of change.... And, even though fire can be scary and destructive, it's our job as followers of Jesus, as stewards of this world, to fan that flame.

Greta Thunberg, the diminutive young activist from Sweden echoed this message when she said, "I don't want you to be hopeful. I want you to panic and act as if the house was on fire... because it is."

Amen