



Fire Ablaze

Jeremiah 23:23-29; Luke 12:49-56 A

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Conflicts in families, towns, and nations are at the order of the day.

Many families start off in conflict. How many of you were not supposed to marry your spouse because he or she was of a different Christian denomination, like one were Lutheran and the other Catholic? How about if he were Irish and she, God forbid, Italian? The scope of the cultural prohibitions, I suspect, was to limit the natural tensions that are part of life: one, the reasoning goes, doesn't want to start on the wrong foot and pave the way for even greater family wars.

Conflict is present in the Church as well. C. S. Lewis gives us his view of conflict in *Mere Christianity*: "I didn't go to religion to make me happy. I always knew a bottle of Port would do that. If you want a religion to make you feel really comfortable, I certainly don't recommend Christianity."

Jesus himself was familiar with conflict from the get-go. The threat of assassination by a jealous king caused him and his family to find refuge in Egypt (Matthew 2). On his first day on the job, he preached in his hometown synagogue and people so disliked what he had to say that they were about to hurl him off a cliff (Luke 4:16-30). Later, as his teaching and healing encountered not only gratitude but also pushback, his family tried to come and rescue him from public shame and possible harm claiming that he had gone out of his mind (Mark 3:20-35).

No matter how much he tried to convey the message of the kingdom of God, he couldn't make much of a break-through.

But maybe that reveals the inner false expectation that because he was preaching and living the kingdom he was supposed to be welcomed and thanked and all would be well. But exactly the opposite is true: because he conveyed the message of God's kingdom, he encountered opposition.

John Dominic Crossan, a New Testament scholar, reminds us that Jesus had both a religious dream and a social program, and it was that conjunction that got him killed. The Roman Empire may have regularly abused its power, but it seldom wasted it. It did not crucify teachers and philosophers; it usually just exiled them permanently or cleared them out of Rome periodically.

Indeed, if Jesus had been only a matter of words or ideas, the Romans would have probably ignored him, and we would probably not be talking about him or even be here today. His Kingdom movement, however, with its healing and exorcisms, was action and practice, not just

thoughts and theory. Jesus was not a theoretician; his teachings had very practical consequences not only for individuals but for the culture at large.

Jesus' healing empowered people so that they would be free and able to enjoy the fulness of their humanity. The expanding colonial hegemony imposed a controlled commercialized economy on land and sea resources. Peasants and fishermen alike could easily find themselves subject to heavy local and imperial taxation. For the mass, debt and destitution was the ordinary economic reality that manifested itself in loss of status, dignity, and freedom.

One of Luther's most potent commentaries on economic justice is his Commentary on Psalm 82 (Luther's Works vol. 13, p. 54), which has lovely lines like this: "For so to help a man that he does not need to become a beggar is just as much of a good work and a virtue as to give alms to a man who has already become a beggar."

To frustrated parishioners screaming "Keep politics out of the pulpit!" Luther responds, "It is God's will . . . that those who are in the office [of ministry] and are called to do so shall rebuke their gods [rulers] boldly and openly. . . . To rebuke rulers is not seditious, provided it is done in the way here described: namely, by the office by which God has committed that duty, and through God's Word, spoken publicly, boldly, and honestly" (pp. 29, 50). That duty which Luther says is part of a pastor's vocation is prophetic leadership.

Luther's main treatise on government emphasizes that the purpose of government is to serve the neighbor, not the self ("Temporal Authority," Luther's Works, vol. 45, 93-100, especially 100). The neighbor here is not simply someone next door but includes all people regardless of differences in economic status, political ideology, religious affiliation, race, sexual orientation, gender identity, citizenship status, ethnicity, age, etc

The incarnation of the Word in Jesus Christ means that God not only takes creation seriously but also identifies with human beings, especially the last and the least (Matthew 25:31-46 and Philippians 2:1-11).

Guidelines for honest, responsive, and competent government were revealed from the earliest days of Israel (Exodus 18:19-23; Deuteronomy 16:18-20, 17:8-13). Jesus called his followers to serve rather than lord it over their neighbors (Matthew 20:25-28).

Jesus' itinerant ministry provided teaching, preaching, and healing aimed at reconciling people to one another and to God through an ethically righteous relationship. Jesus demonstrated what that looks like through the many parables and especially through the many meals he took with people. At those meals, the parables of hospitality, acceptance, mercy, and forgiveness took visible shape.

Healing happened at the table where the intimacy among the guests, rich and poor alike sharing food as equals, all-inclusive and diverse, introduced the vulnerability of lowered defense mechanisms and broken-down barriers.

At those meals, Jesus was host and master, teaching and leading by example. In his times and culture, in affluent households, servants would be washing the guests' feet and serve at the table. When servants were not available, women would perform those duties. He often assumed those roles himself. His strategy was to seat people of different classes and backgrounds together at meals.

At those lively meals, he took, blessed, broke, and gave. That was his *modus operandi*, the way he structured his ministry and revolutionized relationships. As a servant leader, Jesus modeled for us a new way of relating to one another in loving service.

But those meals, that pattern of relating to one another with dignity and respect was what broke the camel's back: those who were in a privileged hierarchical status within the social structure and had most to lose from the proposed divine kingdom way fought back hard. Jesus knew they would and that his followers would receive the same treatment.¹

Jesus was advancing the elimination of class, gender, national, ideological, and religious boundaries as a way of reconciling us to one another and to usher in God's kingdom. Obviously, not everybody gave a vote of approval.

Jesus calls us to join that very kingdom. That call requires a transformation of the heart. We encounter the same difficulties, tensions, and conflicts within ourselves and interpersonally.

Pride and privilege may hinder our growth: we may be tempted to go our own way, not heeding the call, to fight those who prophetically live according to the words of Jesus and remind us of our stubbornness and inconsistencies. Obviously, we can delude ourselves and double down on our obtuseness and find rational excuses to maintain our position, both morally and socially. It is like turning to prophets who claim to speak on God's behalf but have their own agenda at heart and have a populist message.

This is where conflicts in our hearts, families, congregations, and society will surface. This is when a crisis will present itself. A crisis is not negative by and of itself. It's an opportunity for growth if we know how to use it.

Throughout the prophet Jeremiah's lifetime (626-586 BCE), much of the Middle East was at war, and Jeremiah proclaimed that the plight of Israel and Judah was God's punishment—here, God's fire, God's hammer—for their unfaithfulness. His unpopular message, which was rejected and led to his persecution, included condemnation of false prophets, who relied on dreams, but who spoke only what people wanted to hear.

If we honestly listen to ourselves and what motivates us; if we truly mind one another with compassion and understanding; if we are willing to respect one another and do the hard work of remaining engaged and of seeking the common good and not personal or party agenda, then the tearing down of the old and the building up of the new, the family divisions and social conflicts that the Kingdom of God requires will make that very Kingdom visible; then, God's Kingdom will take root and grow into an actual welcoming place which will give refuge and nurturance to people of all nations and race, gender, class, and language. A baptism by fire will purify our intentions and set us on fire for God's Kingdom of justice.

And so, we may honestly pray: Thy Kingdom come, Lord, in our hearts and in our families, in your Church and in your world. May people know and live out your will. May we learn to take, bless, break, and give our lives away for the sake of the world. May we be prophets of truth no matter the cost. And may your Holy Spirit sweep us up in love, mold us in the ways of wisdom, and embolden us with confidence and resolve. Amen.

¹ Matthew 10:16-39; 16:24-26;