



Richmond Hill Reflections

“The Power of Fire” (Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft)

August 18, 2019; Tenth Sunday after Pentecost

Reading: Luke 12:49-53; Excerpt from Chapter 5 of *Fellowship of the Ring* by J.R.R. Tolkien

It feels like a cruel joke that it's in the summer when there are wildfires that we hear Jesus say he's come to bring fire. We're understandably uncomfortable given the increasingly common reality of big fires. But it also reveals something about us, or at least the theology that dominated Christianity, if the primary quality of fire we hear in the image is of destruction. We hear Jesus speaking of wrath even though we generally associate his message with loving mercy.

As I shared during “Learning Together” there are beneficial ways we use fire – for cooking, for light, to bake a clay pot. You may say, these are contained fires but Jesus wishes the fire is ablaze, a word that seems out of control, like a wildfire. Yet humans have set fires ablaze in beneficial ways for thousands of years. On the Great Plains, Indigenous peoples set fires to burn undergrowth and make grass more lush and sweet. Sweeter grass means fatter bison. Similarly, in forested regions, people set fires to encourage certain plants to grow. We think of how spruce need fire to burst open the cones and release seeds, but blueberries grow after a fire. Berries are an important food source not just in summer but dried for over the winter. Equally important are birch. They are the first trees to recolonize a burnt-out area. The bark is used to make baskets and other containers, is turned into twine and mats, gets used for shelter, and of course, to fashion canoes. Such an important resource needed to be managed and fire was used to do just that.

To me, this highlights the transformative nature of fire, which I suspect was Jesus' point. When fire is associated in Hebrew Scripture with the end of days it's not wrath but transformation. The “Day of the Lord” is not the destruction of the earth but what Dominic Crossan refers to as the “Great Clean-up”, when oppressive structures are swept away and a more just age is established. This connects to another aspect of fire in the bible - divine presence. A fiery pillar led the people out of slavery. Fire atop Mount Sinai appeared when G-d formed a covenant with the people and invited them to let go of the structures that were the root of their enslavement and live differently with each other. The *shekinah* of G-d's presence that filled the Temple with light reminded them how G-d is close not distant, all around us and within us. This shared presence makes us family.

Recognizing the closeness of divine presence is an important starting point in the transformation we seek. Consider this: the Orthodox Church teaches that the Word became flesh to lift us up, to restore us to our true selves. In the context of our reading, this theosis means Jesus brings to each of us the same reality of presence with which he burned, so that the spark of divine love in us can also be a flame. There are a number of ways we can nurture this. Meditative practice is anything that enables us to become decentred and see how we're part of a wider, inter-connected reality. It could be quiet reflection, spending time in nature, taking part in acts of service, coming together for worship. Whatever it is, we take time releasing self focus to connect beyond ourselves.

This letting go enables us to be a spark for transformation around us. This is done whatever our context. It doesn't have to be huge. All of us doing our own loving work sets alight the change we need. I saw this in the hospital with my dad. One of the nurses took the time to make him feel special. He kept insisting on getting out of bed even though they decided he was too wobbly to do so. Then a nurse came in with her colleague and got him settled. She was firm but gentle with him, praising him for following directions. That could have been enough but knowing his cognitive state, she started singing for him and then with him as she sponged him down. By the time she finished, it was practically a karaoke bar. She didn't need to do that but chose to, and so made our circle more loving, helping me be more open to assist dad in less comfortable ways.

Loving like that impacts those around us and they do the same. In this way we create greater change around us. But we know it can't stop there. Truly transformative fire means systemic change. Jesus said father will be divided against son, daughter against mother. This generational image suggests transition from one worldview to another, which can bring great conflict. We see this in what's taking place in Hong Kong. When China began opening up economically, they still maintained strict authoritarian control. They posited rightly that for many people prosperity was more important than freedom. But that can't hold forever, especially in Hong Kong where they were promised a more democratic system after the return of the territory. There is also a clash at play in the US. While the focus may be on the White House, we're seeing a struggle between two ways of living in America. As the privilege of a mostly white power base is rightly being deconstructed, many are not changing without a fight, resisting greater justice and opportunity for racialized peoples. There is no risk of white people being "replaced" but pundits whip up fear of it just the same. Those who know history recognize this tactic. Racial conflict has often been used to shift focus from those who are really holding back change – those with economic power.

While part of change, conflict can beat us down. This is why we need communities of solidarity like this one. Here we commit to each other like Sam, Merry and Pippin did, promising to go with Frodo despite the great risk. We need people like that because we may want to give up when it gets hard. We need support as well as the gift of additional people to shoulder the load. As well, taking us full circle, we need people to help us with personal, not just systemic change. Like Frodo nearing Mordor, as we get closer to confronting power, we may discover the hard truth that what we're fighting is within us too. Though hard to face, like Sam helping Frodo so he could throw the ring into the fire of Mount Doom, we help each other confront hurts as well as unfaced complicity. We help each other grow as together we struggle with injustice. Finally, the transformation we seek doesn't happen overnight. Thank goodness for community memory, for places like this to help us see how far we've come, and for the Spirit who keeps leading us on.

Friends, through the gift of the Spirit, we bring fire just as Jesus did. While bringing change isn't easy, none of us is alone. Together, may we continue to draw from the fire of our hearts, both individually and together. May we spark the flame that brings transformation. Amen.