

Today's readings focus uncomfortably on opposition and division. Indeed, this gospel presents a puzzling image of Jesus. Scripture commentators take refuge behind the multiple meanings of fire in the Bible. They point out that the image of fire can be used to represent harsh themes like destruction and purgation as well as exhilarating ones like the presence of the Holy Spirit and God's love.

I was reminded of a time in my corporate career when a bunch of otherwise unmemorable consultants came in to help us discover our so-called "burning platforms." Inspired by the spectacular offshore oil rig fires that were making headlines back then, the main idea suggested by "burning platforms" was that you were in deep trouble and needed to do something immediately. Lurking in the background of the imagery were the unspoken but decidedly unpleasant consequences of not getting off the dime.

My friend Dave and I were chatting about this gospel passage a while back. Dave had attended a biblical school in his previous diocese and likes to talk about what he learned and also about what still puzzles him. This gospel passage puzzles him a lot.

"It seems so out of character for Jesus," Dave said. "Most of the time he's healing folks, teaching us, feeding people and so on. This one is all about opposition and division. I don't get it."

I reminded Dave that Jesus did have opponents, and suggested to him that maybe Jesus was delivering a 'burning platform' speech to his listeners. "The standard explanation," I said, "is that the evangelists thought that Jesus would be returning soon, and there wasn't much time left for folks to get their act together. The fire he wants to light is more about motivation than destruction; something to get us off the dime, so to speak."

"Why do you think Jesus decided he needed to do that?" Dave asked.

"Maybe it's like this, Dave," I replied. "Remember when our kids were little and we told them to go clean their rooms?"

“Sure,” Dave said.

“And you’d go up an hour later and see that nothing had been done?”

“Oh, yeah,” Dave agreed, “that happened.”

“And then we’d ask our kids when they were planning to clean up?”

“Yeah,” Dave said. “The answer was always ‘soon’.”

“Which meant?” I asked.

We looked at each other, grinned, and said in unison “Never!”

“I suspect that’s why Jesus might’ve felt he needed to light a fire under us,” I said.

“There’s something about delay that invites outright dismissal. It’s just part of being human and Jesus was reminding us of the danger of not getting off the dime.”

“OK,” Dave said, “I get it. But what about all that division? Family members against family members, friends against friends. That doesn’t sound like the Jesus we hear about in the rest of the Gospels.”

“That’s more complex, Dave,” I replied, “Let’s take a look at it. I think you’d agree that no one likes criticism, including you and me. But if our way isn’t based on love of God and neighbor, someone needs to point that out and tell us to get off the dime. It’s not going to feel good when they do it, especially if it comes from a family member or a close friend. We might even burn with shame or flame with anger at having been found out. Those are strong emotions. It’s no wonder that many choose to hide from them behind the shield of denial and avoidance.”

“Likewise, any time we embrace the change of heart that Jesus told us was necessary – by following God’s invitation to love rather than our own agendas of power, possessions and prestige – we’re going to lose all those friends who don’t see it the way we now do, especially if we’re encouraging other people to join us. No emperor likes to be told that he has no clothes, and evil empires depend on everyone’s complicity in overlooking evils. Look what happened to the Hebrew prophets, Jesus himself and the majority of the

saints. They all endured fierce opposition simply for giving witness to the ways of God. I think that's the division Jesus was talking about and the reason it emerges."

We chatted for a few moments about the trials of a couple of saints we knew, but then I said to Dave, "You know, fires of conflict and purgation are definitely in the mix, Dave, but maybe as much as that or even more, it's the fire of love that Jesus wants to bring upon the earth."

"Fire's definitely a two-edged sword. It's as much about warmth and light as it is about consuming anything. Frequently, in the moment I receive the Eucharist, I experience a fire that consumes my selfishness and gives off the light and warmth of love."

"Interesting, Tim," Dave remarked. "Your experience sounds a bit like the fires of purgatory; they're all about love, too, and the pain of confronting our own unlovingness. I'm reminded of how the Catholic theologian Peter Kreeft describes the fires of purgatory and hell in his book *Everything you Wanted to Know about Heaven but Never Asked*."

"What he says is that heaven is all there is. If God is love and God is everywhere, then really, how could it be otherwise? Hell's quite real, but it's a state of being, not a place, as the Catechism explains. We don't get on a bus to go to heaven or hell; we get there, so to speak, by choosing to become people who love or people who don't. What you and I call hell is simply that part of heaven that's occupied by people who can't stand being there, in the face of the burning fire of unconditional love. They experience that fire of love as a torment because they are unwilling to love. They just want it their way, period. No room for people. No room for creation. No room for God. No room for love."

"Fascinating," I replied. "Sounds like a person could be in hell even now, right here on earth."

"True enough," Dave agreed. "Or heaven. St. Catherine of Siena used to remark, 'It's heaven all the way to heaven and hell all the way to hell.' All we have to do is ask exactly which kind of fire is consuming us these days anyway."