

Today's Gospel lesson is one of the most difficult readings, I think, in all of scripture. Here Jesus, the Prince of Peace himself, seems to lose his cool with his disciples ranting about kindling fire and causing division.

Seemingly contradicting his prayer to the Father that we would be one, as he and the Father are one.<sup>1</sup> And his lament about how he longed to gather God's children together like a mother hen gathers her brood under her wings<sup>2</sup>. Or that time Jesus admonished his followers to be reconciled with one another, that if someone is upset with them, they should make amends first, before offering their gifts to God, and to settle matters with their adversary quickly<sup>3</sup>. Or his sermon on the Mount with proclaimed "*Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called [children] of God.*"<sup>4</sup>

In today's text, Jesus says he "came to bring fire to the earth" and not "peace but rather division" dividing households, "fathers against sons, sons against fathers, mothers against daughters, daughters against mothers, Mother-in-law against daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law."

So, what do we do about this? How do we reconcile this message with all the other messages of peace Jesus preached? How do we deal with the contradictions?

I think we have to start by looking at the context. The text says explicitly, Jesus was under significant stress. Don't raise your hands but who has ever said something they later regretted under stress? Jesus is stressed because the clock is ticking. He won't be with his disciples much longer and they are not understanding his message.

The Jewish people had long been awaiting the Messiah who would rule as exalted King, a descendent from King David who would restore Israel.

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<sup>1</sup> John 17

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 23:37 & Luke 13:34

<sup>3</sup> Matthew 5

<sup>4</sup> Matthew 5:9

Many Jews believed the Messiah would<sup>5</sup>:

- Re-establish the throne in Jerusalem and rule with justice, righteousness, and peace.
- Unite the tribes of Israel and bring prosperity to the land.

Their hope was especially strong under Roman occupation—people understandably longed for a king who would free them from their enemies and restore their political power and position, culture, and national identity.

But Jesus didn't gather a military, and he was never going to overthrow Rome. He came preaching about a vastly different kind of kingdom. Where people love God, their neighbors, themselves, and their enemies, where people seek peace and justice, where people lay down their lives for one another and a community who cares for each other's needs.

Jesus focuses more on the internal work and eternity while many of his followers were consumed with what was happening externally and the past.

So, it's no surprise that Jesus was stressed. There was a massive gap between what his disciples were hoping for, and Jesus was actually doing. He was knowingly about to face his death, and he was working hard preparing the disciples for what was about to happen. They needed a reality check and some tough love as they got closer to Jerusalem to prepare them for the unimaginable.

Sometimes in our lives what we expect and what we actually experience are very different and we go through periods of disillusionment and disappointment before being reoriented. This happens in our faith journey when we feel dissatisfied with how our prayers are answered or when the spiritual practices we've always used no longer bring us that close feeling to God.

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<sup>5</sup> 2 Samuel 7:12–16; Isaiah 11:1–9

This disillusionment also happens with almost any major life change like getting married, becoming a parent, buying a new house or car, starting a new job and even retiring.

Home ownership is great! Until the roof begins to leak or your well water is dirty, and you cannot just call your landlord!

Becoming a new parent is great until you are running on 2 hours of sleep, covered in spit up, and haven't showered in days. *I understand this does not apply to Grandparenting! It's all fun and games and then you send them home.*

Even retirement, I'm told, can be a letdown if you lack a purpose and don't know what to do with your time.

This is true for Christian community too. It's great to come to worship with others until the preacher says something challenging or you realize the person sitting in the pew next to you voted for the other guy or gal, or you suspect someone sitting nearby needs a shower.

In his book *Life Together*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, says that "Just as surely as God desires to lead us to a knowledge of genuine Christian fellowship, so surely must we be overwhelmed by a great disillusionment with others, with Christians in general, and if we are fortunate, with ourselves."<sup>6</sup>

The reality is that we have to lay down our expectations and desires in order to live into what God has called us to, which we can trust is much better than anything we could hope for.

Which means that if we want God's will to be done, we need to let go of the way we want things to be. This requires patience and perseverance on our part to press through the times of disillusionment and difficulties in life.

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<sup>6</sup> Life Together, pg. 26-27

The letter to the Hebrews reminds of us the great cloud of witnesses who lived before us and faced great difficulties but held fast to their faith while encouraging us to “run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.”

There is no question that Jesus came to teach us about God’s unending love for us and to draw us into relationship and partnership with Him and each other to help usher in the Kingdom of God.

There’s also no denying that the reality of the world in which we live in today is full of division, dysfunction, and fear. Even among committed Christians there is great division. Sunday mornings are said to be the most segregated time in America.

Feelings of frustration and anger like Jesus expressed in today’s reading are not unacceptable or even unhealthy. Anger is a God given emotion, just like disappointment, disgust, and fear. These difficult emotions are our teachers. They are red flags, telling us that something is wrong and needs attention.

Jesus, saying he comes to bring fire and talking about Baptism, should remind us of how John the Baptist said that he baptized with water but the one who would come after him, would baptize with water and fire. Most of you have heard me say this before but fire is symbolic of purification, refinement, God’s presence, and new life. It’s not always hellfire, destruction, and damnation.

I wonder if some of the anger and frustration Jesus felt shouldn’t resonate with us to kindle that fire so that we can accomplish God’s will. There’s even a saying that if you aren’t angry, you must not be paying attention.

How can we be at peace when people are starving, and wars are raging?  
Desmond Tutu famously said, “if you are neutral in situations of injustice, you

have chosen the side of the oppressor. If an elephant has its foot on the tail of a mouse and you say that you are neutral, the mouse will not appreciate your neutrality.”

The messiah we follow and long to imitate, came to change the world. Let’s not forget, that in addition to preaching peace and unity, he also got fired up about injustice and even flipped over tables when necessary and maybe we should give ourselves permission to do so too.

The 4-part Fransiscan Blessing, written by Sister Ruth Fox

MAY GOD BLESS YOU with discomfort,  
at easy answers, half-truths,  
and superficial relationships  
so that you may live deep within your heart.

May God bless you with anger  
at injustice, oppression,  
and exploitation of people,  
so that you may work for justice, freedom and peace.

May God bless you with tears,  
to shed for those who suffer pain,  
rejection, hunger, and war,  
so that you may reach out your hand  
to comfort them and to turn their pain to joy.

And may God bless you with enough foolishness  
to believe that you can make a difference in the world,  
so that you can do what others claim cannot be done,  
to bring justice and kindness to all our children and the poor.