

“I have come to bring fire on the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! ⁵⁰ But I have a baptism to undergo, and how distressed I am until it is completed! ⁵¹ Do you think I came to bring peace on earth? No, I tell you, but division. ⁵² From now on there will be five in one family divided against each other, three against two and two against three. ⁵³ They will be divided, father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law.” (Luke 12:49-53)

Will You Stand with Jesus?

What is the role of your faith in your life? How much does it matter when you make decisions? How much does it influence your opinions about politics? About your neighbors? About what you watch on TV? In the years that I’ve been a pastor, I’ve noticed that it’s easier to go along with what God’s Word teaches when we’re talking about something that we’re already on board with. It’s a lot harder when it goes against something we want to do. Of course, that’s not really surprising because all Christians still have a sinful nature. That nature is really good at rationalizing things we want to do. But we live in an age in which openly speaking about your faith and making choices based on your faith has become increasingly difficult. Without really thinking about it, we can fall back on politically correct mantras like “we don’t judge other people.” If that statement means that God’s commands about what is right and wrong don’t apply to everyone, then we have a problem. We can either stand with Jesus, which means confessing what his Word says, or we can stand with the society we live in. It’s a choice that we have to make every day, in matters big and small. My friends, Jesus’ words to us this morning place that choice squarely in front of us. **Will you stand with Jesus?**

I.

It’s easy to say something vague and let people believe what they want to believe about what you mean. That can be a very effective way of avoiding conflicts. Political parties use it all the time to keep as many people as they can in their “big tent”. But when it comes to standing with Jesus, it doesn’t work. **Will you stand with Jesus even when he divides the world?**

That’s what Jesus told us he came here to do: **“Do you think I came to bring peace on earth? No, I tell you, but division.”** Now, there is a sense in which Jesus came to bring “peace on earth.” Christ came to put an end to the warfare between God and man. Everyone who stands with Christ has peace with God. And standing with Jesus is the only way to conquer the selfish and sinful desires that war against our unity with each other. It is the only way to true peace on earth. Sadly, that peace will never come in this life. It only comes in heaven. So Jesus said that he did not come to bring peace on the earth.

What did he mean? He meant that you are either with him or you against him. If you stand with Jesus then by definition you stand against the world. Guess what? The unbelieving world is totally hostile to that. Just to make sure I wasn’t making something up, this week, I googled the question, “Are Christians stupid?” You’d be amazed at the hate-filled sites that came up. Now, I’m sure there are some thoughtful critiques out there, because we Christians aren’t perfect. Too often, we’re our own worst enemies. But if you take a stand with Jesus, the world is going to hate you. It’s going to twist Jesus’ words like “Judge not” to mean that we can’t ever condemn sin. It’s going to call you names that you wouldn’t want your children to hear.

Jesus said, **“I have come to bring fire on the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled!”** Generally speaking, Jesus uses fire to talk about two things: Judgment Day and the work of the Holy Spirit. Which does he mean here? In the context, he’s talking about the coming judgment. Both before and after this section, he gives examples of Christians who wind up in hell. Jesus came to bring fire on the earth. He preached the law as fervently as any human being ever did. His enemies hated him because they knew he was calling them sinners. Jesus wanted the fire to come. To God, judgment is a good thing. Punishing evil is part of his nature. Jesus came to begin the final march to Judgment Day. As the Son of God, he looked forward to the final condemnation of all those who refuse to stand with him.

Does that offend you? If it does, why? It might offend you because you have trouble reconciling a Jesus who longs for Judgment Day with a Jesus who laid down his life to save us. How do love and judgment go together? That relationship is the heart of God’s message. Law and gospel are both God’s teachings. God

is holy. Holiness can't just let evil pass. God deals with evil in two ways. One way was by sending Jesus to be perfect in our place, to die and pay for all our evil, to rise and wash it away from God's sight forever. Jesus did that for every human being who will ever live. God loves us all and wants us all to hear and believe and live with him for all eternity. But God cannot abide evil. Those who refuse his message must still be dealt with. And the all holy God doesn't doubt himself when he condemns evil. He doesn't second guess himself, like we 21st century parents do when we punish our children. He doesn't make himself crazy with anxiety over whether it's the right thing to do, because God is holy and all that he does is right.

And his purpose is different from ours. As a parent, every punishment I ever gave my children was really discipline. I was trying to teach them something for the rest of their lives. That's different from justice. Justice gives criminals – sinners – what their crimes deserve. Jesus is the Son of God and the Judge of all the earth. On Judgment Day, he will not hesitate to condemn the wicked. Already when he was on his way to Jerusalem to die, he looked forward to that fire coming on the earth and purifying it from all sin forever. That is the final reason he looked forward to it. Evil ruined God's good creation. The Son of God wants that creation restored. He came to bring fire to purify it forever.

Do we stand with Jesus on this? It's hard, isn't it? All those hate-fill websites think that we Christians are hypocritical hatemongers because we believe abortion and homosexuality and no fault divorce are sins. But they don't see the anguish we experience when we have to stand where Jesus stands. They don't see how hard it is for us to separate ourselves from what our world believes. They don't get that sometimes we overstate our positions and get downright legalistic because it's hard for us sinners to stand with Jesus and do it in a way that conveys his love. They don't see our struggle.

But God does. He knows why it's there – we're sinners. As long as we live down here, we will never have hearts that are 100% lined up with God's. You know what? All that sin and weakness makes us unworthy of God. But Jesus died for that, too. Jesus died because we will have a sinful nature in our hearts for as long as we live down here. Jesus died because our natural inclination is to agree with the people who disagree with God, or to become self-righteous Pharisees who really deserve all those nasty comments. Jesus died and paid for all our struggle and failure and sin. Then he rose to tell us that we are forgiven forever. He rose to tell us that our weakness and failure will not keep us out of heaven.

That message of forgiveness created a new man in our hearts. That new man, the believer, absolutely does agree 100% with all that Jesus says. He understands that Jesus came to divide the world between believers who will live forever and unbelievers who will spend eternity in hell. That new man wants to stand with Jesus. He rejoices to stand there. But on this side of heaven, that new man has to fight a war everyday with that old man that doesn't believe. We ourselves are divided inside. But Jesus rose and every time he tells us that, he strengthens the new man. He gives us the faith to beat that old man and stand with Christ today. He enables us to forget about yesterday's failures and rededicate ourselves to living for him. And he promises that the day is coming when we will stand with him in heaven forever, free from all the struggles, free from the Old Man and all our sin, free and joyful forever.

II.

Jesus has taken his stand with us. He stood with us in this life, when he was born in Bethlehem and lived in our place. Jesus stood with us when he died on the cross to pay for all of our sins. Jesus stood with us when he rose to open the door to heaven and to promise us that we will rise from the dead. And Jesus stands with us every time we hear the gospel. He renews our faith. He lives in our heart. He promises to be with us to the very end of the age – to stand next to us and protect us and care for us and hear our prayers. That's who calls us today to stand with him. Just to make sure we realize how hard it's going to be and how important it is, Jesus zeros on the closest relationships we have. My friends, **will you stand with Jesus even if it means standing against the people you love?**

Jesus told us that he came to bring division. But it's not just a question of people out there, people we don't know. Jesus warned us: **“From now on there will be five in one family divided against each other, three against two and two against three. They will be divided, father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law.”**

How does this happen? One way is when some members of a family are believers and the others simply aren't. They can never agree on this issue and sometimes it breaks those families apart. Especially if some

members become believers as adults, their families may not understand the changes that are taking place. They may not get why this brother or sister suddenly goes to church and has a problem with things they've always done before. Another way it happens is when families are divided in their churches. I bet that's true for most of us here today. In my extended family, there are Catholics and Missouri Synod Lutherans and Nazarenes. Sometimes, those religious differences are challenging, especially when we can't do things together. Sometimes, there's pressure to do what the family wants instead of what you believe is right. Have you ever felt that? It's an example of what Jesus was talking about.

An even more subtle example is when everyone in the immediate family belongs to the same faith, but some people take it more seriously than others. Parents or grandparents might tell children, "Just don't tell the pastor or the teachers at our Lutheran school about that." In the past, if a young couple was living together, grandma might go to the pastor and say, "You need to do something about that." Today, it's more likely she'll tell those kids to keep it a secret so they don't have a problem with the church. Or the problem can be as simple as children or grandchildren of faithful members who just never come to church anymore. It breaks their parents' or grandparents' hearts.

Jesus warns us that we are going to face those situations. Most of us will probably wrestle with the division in our family and how to show love to them without being unfaithful. If we have to choose between them and Christ, our society would think we're terrible if we put our church ahead of our family. But Jesus calls us to put him first. If we don't, we're making that family a kind of false god. Yet it's so hard. Where can we find the strength to do it?

In Christ himself. He tells us what God is looking for and he lives in our hearts by faith. Every time we come to communion and receive the body and blood of Christ, Jesus stands next to us personally and forgives us all our struggle. He strengthens us. Every time we confess our sins – in church and alone – Jesus forgives us. In that action, he reaches into our hearts and gives us new strength to follow him. In this sinful world, it will continue to be a struggle. But in Christ, we always win. Even when we fail, he forgives us and starts us over again. We win. When we stand with Christ and pay the price in this life, we win, because we are standing with the Lord who loved us and will carry us home to heaven.

Martin Luther once wrote a letter to a friend who was struggling with living a Christian life – with standing with Jesus. Luther told him that if we are faithful to everything God teaches us and everything God commands us, from the least little thing to the greatest thing – if we follow God in everything except the one thing that the devil is attacking, we haven't been faithful at all. When it's hard to do what Jesus says, our faith shows its value. When it's a struggle to stand with Jesus, standing with him is a fruit of faith and a gift of love to our Lord. It's only possible through the strength he provides. But he does provide that strength. My friends, stand with Jesus. Amen.