

**Twentieth Sunday in Ordinary Time – Cycle C**  
**Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception – August 18, 2019**  
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Once upon a time, our American political campaigns lasted approximately two months. From Labor Day until the first Tuesday in November, we listened to speeches and made informed decisions and cast our votes. Then we went back to our homes, let those elected govern and we hoped for the best. These days, it is difficult to tell when one election ends because the next campaign begins on election night. No one, it seems, wants to govern, just get re-elected, which is why our campaigns are now reduced to endless name-calling and appealing to all that divides us. Apparently, everyone has abandoned the idea of bringing us together. We are a sharply divided nation. Each candidate is perfectly prepared to be thought of as unacceptable as long as they can persuade us that the other candidate is even more unacceptable.

Hearing the readings today, we wonder if the authors weren't deeply immersed in the 2019 political climate. The prophet Jeremiah is thrown into a cistern and left for dead – only to be rescued when the political climate changed. And then in the gospel, Jesus speaks of father against son, son against father, mother against daughter and the like. On the surface, it all sounds like a typical day on CNN, MSNBC or Fox News. Does faith really put us into such conflict? Are we really called to set the earth on fire, to a life of division and not a life of peace? As always, the answer is yes and no.

Like Jesus, we are called to set the earth on fire – with his love, with his Spirit. Imagine how transforming a true outpouring of the Holy Spirit would be! Might it not seem as powerful and transforming as a fire? Fire is one of those images that remind us of the presence of God – the burning bush that Moses encountered, for example. It gave light and heat, but the bush itself was not consumed. At Pentecost, we are told that tongues of fire came to rest upon the disciples – though none were physically injured by this phenomenon. The fire that the Scriptures speak about, the fire of God, is always consuming, powerful, transforming, but never destructive.

So it is not the image of fire that startles us in today's gospel. It is, rather, Jesus' statement that he has not come to bring peace, but division. We have come to view Jesus as the Prince of Peace, the pastoral Good Shepherd, the spotless Lamb of God. We have experienced the comfort, the compassion, the mercy of Jesus so often that we find it almost impossible to imagine him in any other

context. And yet this gospel passage reminds us that Jesus was not some pie-in-the-sky flake, some dreamer out of touch with reality. More than anyone else, Jesus understood how threatening his message was, how threatening his message is. When he reaches out to the poor and the powerless, he necessarily threatens those who obstinately hold power. When he cures the sick, he necessarily threatens those who would withhold medical resources from the third world and those who lack insurance. When he brings mercy and forgiveness, he necessarily threatens those who profit from creating conflict in our world. And when he challenges us to live a life worthy of the kingdom, he necessarily threatens all who are committed to a life of selfishness and sin.

Yes, Jesus understood that his message of hope, his message of love would not be well-received by all. Any attempt to put God first in our lives necessarily struggles against what is already first – whether wealth, or power, or prestige, or addiction, or our own ego. That struggle takes place within ourselves, within our community, within our nation and within our world. And, as Jesus pointed out in today’s gospel, that struggle often takes place within our families. Households can be divided, feelings can be hurt, the love we feel for one another can be challenged. It may seem at times as though we were political pundits on a podcast or on cable news, battling our family and friends for supremacy. The difference, of course, is that as Christians we never seek conflict for conflict’s sake. We always reach out to others in love and compassion – even when that love and compassion is rejected. Jesus understood that his proclamation of the kingdom would bring division – but he never created division for its own sake. He never raised an army, never resorted to violence, never attacked anyone but Satan. As always, Jesus is our model – of compassion in the face of hostility, of understanding in the face of conflict, of love in the face of hatred. May we take that message of compassion, understanding and love to heart – and may the fire of that love sweep over our nation and the world.