**13 Pentecost, Aug 18, 2013, Is 5: 1-7; Ps 80; Heb 11:29-12:2; Luke 12: 49-56, Rev. Mary Trainor**

A hymn familiar to all of us is "The Battle Hymn of the Republic." This historic hymn, written after the civil war, begins with these words:" **Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord; He is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored; He hath loosed the fateful lightning of His terrible swift sword."** We happily sing those words thinking patriotic thoughts, but wait -- think about those words-- they are terrifying! They describe disciplinary attributes of God we would just as soon ignore.

In today's Gospel, Jesus speaks this way too when He says, "***I came to bring fire to the earth....division.***" In the Bible, the word "***fire***" is often used to signify judgment and cleansing. Earlier in the Gospel of Luke (3:16) we hear that Jesus "***will*** ***baptize you with fire.***" Fire also is about light - bringing light into the darkness. Here, Jesus is speaking about the explosive nature of His presence in our lives. I saw a tee-shirt yesterday that said, "Don't mess with Grandpa." Today, we are reminded, "**Don't mess with Jesus.**" Jesus did not come to affirm our social values or the status quo. He came to bring salvation! Dramatic!

But let's face it, we don't want to think about Jesus bringing fire to the earth. We prefer the picture of the gentle Jesus holding the lamb or surrounded by children? In our faith, we are tempted to construct the God that we want, as opposed to the God who is. After all, we live in a high tech world that is capable of constructing so many amazing things, like night vision goggles and space travel and bionic implants -- so why can't we just make God into what we want? That is not an option for us. God, our creator and redeemer, is God and we are not God. Our God is an integrated whole of many attributes, and one of those attributes is discipline: the refining fire that makes us more like Him. God is the best parent to us, just and loving and wise. Because He loves us so, He does get in our face sometimes - and we need that, this is how we grow. The last verse of the Battle Hymn of the Republic rounds out the view of the integrated whole of God's character, **"In the beauty of the lilies, Christ was born across the Sea, With a glory in His bosom that transfigures you and me; As He died to make men holy, let us die to make men free, While God is marching on. Glory, glory! Hallelujah!"** Our almighty God is both near and far, is both loving and just, is both compassionate and disciplinary. Jesus came to bring fire and division.

What does Jesus mean when He talks about bringing ***division***? Is Jesus telling us our families are not important? No. Is Jesus wanting us to fight with each other? No, but He does mean for us to be strong in our faith. And, when we are strong in our faith people are going to get upset--this is where the division may happen. Example: In a dinner gathering sometime, when you are saying grace, add prayers for enemies, like prisoners on death row or at Guantanamo-- then see how people will react! You can be sure that this will cause division. The bible says we are to pray for our enemies, as well as those we love! Whew, that is tough, but it is part of following Jesus and we need to suffer the consequences. Jesus came to change the world, and He does it through us, His ambassadors. Since we live in such a self-centered culture, people don't like the message of Jesus. Yet, our faith in Jesus is above ALL ELSE in our lives! When we consult with God first about how to spend our time and resources, it upsets people; we are not perceived as much fun as before. Trouble happens - and it will not be easy for us. It is not supposed to be easy.

Moving to the end of today's Gospel, Jesus talks about weather forecasting. There are a couple of given truths about us Wisconsinites -- we love the Packers, and we love to watch the weather. Jesus says, "***When you see a cloud rising in the west, you immediately say, "it is going to rain; and so it happens.***" Jesus is speaking our language here; we need to be very aware of the weather, it affects all our activities! But wait, that's not the point: Jesus finishes with discipline by saying, "***You hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present time?"*** In other words, we are better at weather forecasting than recognizing Jesus in our midst. Jesus is drawing attention to our misplaced priorities. Our faith is above ALL ELSE. He brought love, mercy, life to us and we need to know it, and live by it! Just think how much better the world would be if everyone spent as much time praying as we do checking the weather.

This is a tough Gospel lesson today: fire and division. How do we stay strong in the Lord, living according to God's values and not those of the world, and not grow weak? Our Epistle reading tells us how. It said, "***Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith***." You are not alone!

It's like you are traveling down a highway in your life, a new road built just for you that is safe and wide, straight and true. It replaces the old one that was winding and confused. The new highway is not built overnight, however, and along the way you will encounter orange barrels as you struggle, encounter trouble: the construction zones. Jesus is guiding you through the obstacles, if you let Him, as you move forward and you grow along the way, emerging stronger. So, Jesus is with us as we run with perseverance the race -- but we also have the "***great cloud of witnesses***." The ***great cloud of witnesses*** are Christians who have gone before us, who understand the troubles we face living out our faith, and who now encourage us. There are millions over the past 2,000 years who are with us here, rooting for each of us. Have you ever seen what happens on the sidelines of a marathon? All along the way there people line the course who do not run in the race: their whole role is to shout encouragement to those who run by, who they don't even know. They say "**It's tough, but** **you can do it. Hang in there. You are almost there - so close, so worth it, keep going**." This is what the "***great cloud of witnesses***" is doing for your spiritual journey. We here cheer each other on too as we try to live as faithful followers of Christ, for we are a another kind of family -- a family that counts --a family that is forged with the blood of Jesus.

Live “***Looking to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of your faith,”*** be encouraged by your family here, and ***"the great cloud of witnesses"*** rooting for you as you persevere on the highway of your life***.*** Amen.