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Pentecost 12, Proper 15

*Do you think that I have
come to bring peace to the
earth? No, I tell you, but
rather division!*

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• *Lectionary Readings (Year C)*

Revised Common Lectionary

First Reading	Isaiah 5:1-7 or Jeremiah 23:23-29
Second Reading	Hebrews 11:29-12:2
Gospel	Luke 12:49-56
Psalm	80:1-2, 8-19 or 82

Luke 12:49-56

1 "I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! I have a
2 baptism with which to be baptized, and what stress I am under until it is completed!
3 Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather
4 division! From now on five in one household will be divided, three against two and two
5 against three; they will be divided: father against son and son against father, mother
6 against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against her daughter-
7 in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law."

8 He also said to the crowds, "When you see a cloud rising in the west, you immediately
9 say, 'It is going to rain'; and so it happens. And when you see the south wind blowing,
10 you say, 'There will be scorching heat'; and it happens. You hypocrites! You know how
11 to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but why do you not know how to
12 interpret the present time?"

Exploring the Pattern: Themes and Motifs

1. "I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what stress I am under until it is completed! Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division!"

What is *fire*? What does *fire* do? How do fires start? How are they put out?

What kind of *fire* do you imagine Jesus is wishing to happen on the earth? What might kindling a fire in the lives of those around him do? What kind of baptism of fire is Jesus desiring?

What is *peace*? Why do you suppose people think that Jesus is bringing them peace? They think peace will produce, create, or bring them what? Jesus, on the other hand, may believe peace does what?

Why might Jesus favor *fire* and *division* over *peace*?

Two followers draw close and hear Jesus say he is a bringer of fire. They hear him say that he is not bringing peace but division. One follower turns to the other saying:

“ _____ ”

The other answers. He tells his friend:

“ _____ ”

“From now on five in one household will be divided, 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 her daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law.”

At the Workbench: Pentecost 12, Proper 15

What do you imagine it is like to live in such a household? Why might Jesus desire division in the family rather than peace? Peace without division likely produces what in the family? No fire would make family life like what?

2. *He also said to the crowds, "When you see a cloud rising in the west, you immediately say, 'It is going to rain'; and so it happens. And when you see the south wind blowing, you say, 'There will be scorching heat'; and it happens. 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?"*

Jesus then raises what question? His examples of weather reporting introduce what application of his teaching about fire, peace, and division? What is a *hypocrite*? Why do you suppose he calls the people in the crowd *hypocrites*? Why do they not know how to interpret their times? What are they missing?

If they assume Jesus is a bringer of peace, what is going to be one of the windows through which they perceive and describe him, their households and themselves?

On the other hand, if they assume Jesus is a bringer of fire and division, what is going to be one of the windows through which they perceive and describe him, their households and themselves?

3. When you look at your world what is the fire that is burning? What might be the kindling that at any moment may ignite in flames? Where do you see division? How are those of the same household divided against one another?

When you look at your world, where is the peace? Who are those who labor to put out fires, overcome divisions, and bring peace?

Exploring the Pattern: Themes and Motifs

Luke 12:49-56 • August 15, 2010

4. What if you were to perceive the world through Jesus' eyes? Look at the evening TV news and the front page of your morning paper. What might Jesus describe as happening between the nations of the world? Consider:

Muslims, Christians and Jews

the United States Congress

your city or town government

an evening of TV sitcoms

unemployment

lack of health care

gun violence and gun control

the wars

the drug epidemic

AIDS

terrorist attacks

education in your community schools

the economy

Pick one. Where do you perceive people seeking to put out the fire, heal the divisions, and promote peace? What is happening as a result?

And then where do you see, not peace, but fires kindled and raging, as well as division? What is happening as a result?

At the Workbench: Pentecost 12, Proper 15

Try it again with another focus.

Now. Within you—soul, spirit, and psyche—why might Jesus be wishing to kindle a fire? What are the divisions needed to disturb and disrupt your peace? How might the peace you work for get in the way of what Jesus wants for you? How do you welcome and seek a Jesus baptism? How do you avoid such a baptism?

Reading Between the Lines

From now on five in one household will be divided, 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...

"There is no love like a mother's love," goes the adage. I know this to be true from my personal experience as both a mother and a daughter. I also know the pain that love can engender. Mother's love is first, powerful, and all-embracing. It is resplendent—as is she who nurtures us with her own body, intuiting our needs, and protecting us from life's dangers. Mother's love is also controlling. She who gives life also has the power to take it away.

Ancient mythologies acknowledge this truth with archetypal representations of the "devouring mother." The Hindu goddess Kali, the Greek goddess Artemis, and the Egyptian Goddess Inanna, as examples, are each as well-known for their violent, destructive capacities as for their creative attributes. The destroyer role was eventually cast largely onto hags, crones, and witches where it remains today in Western imagination. But at one time, the powers of creation and destruction were combined within the primary female deity of a culture as a witness to the cyclical nature of all life.

No wonder I still sometimes cringe to hear (or remember) that certain tone in my mother's voice—and to hear it in my own as well. My body warns me against displeasing my mother, just as it warns my children against displeasing me. And yet that is precisely what I must be willing to do in order to claim my own authority—what my children must do in order to grow up and claim theirs.

This process of disentanglement from my mother has been one of the most difficult and painful experiences of my life, made all the more so most likely because I waited so long to begin it. I am compliant, a rule-follower by some combination of nature and upbringing, and loathe to rock the boat unnecessarily. It took many years of deep soul work for me to realize that my mother's love, which is real and steadfast, is not the same as her understanding. While I share some of her genes and many of her mannerisms, I do not share all of her values, beliefs, or attitudes toward life. To pretend so limits my life—and hers. Apron strings bind in both directions. The untying of those strings, however, forces a dissolution of our former relationship, a submission to the devouring goddess who also brings new life.

Yet how do I claim my freedom and authority without insulting her role in my creation? How can I, as a member of my generation, move the evolutionary ball forward without discounting the truths of the past? How might my children move it even further without leaving me behind? It's difficult, maybe even impossible, to do gently. Perhaps that's why Jesus wasn't gentle.

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Reading Between the Lines

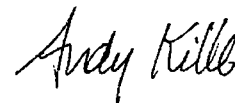
On the left-hand side of a piece of paper, make a list of words that, for you, go with *division*—words like *fire* and *against*. Make another list on the right-hand side of the page of words you associate with *peace*. Now, between the two columns draw a stick figure to represent your self. Which words in the left-hand column draw you to them? (You may need to think of different people or situations and causes that make *division* call out to you.) Draw lines between those words and your stick figure. Consider the right-hand column and draw lines in the same way. How do you live between *division* and *peace*? What may each demand of you? What might each give you?



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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?

How does Jesus' comparison of interpreting the weather and interpreting the times strike you? How are they the same? How are they different? Our word "hypocrite" comes directly from the Greek, where it originally referred to an actor on the stage and then came to apply to anyone who was not what they appeared to be—a pretender, play-actor, dissembler. How might Jesus' audience be play-acting in relation to understanding the present time? What do you know of ways that you wish to be seen as more or less than what you are—wiser, kinder, stronger, gentler? What false faces do you turn toward the world?



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Parallel Readings

From *The New Yorker*

Head Case

Mental disorders sit at the intersection of three distinct fields. They are biological conditions, since they correspond to changes in the body. They are also psychological conditions, since they are experienced cognitively and emotionally—they are part of our conscious life. And they have moral significance, since they involve us in matters such as personal agency and responsibility, social norms and values, and character, and these all vary as cultures vary.

Many people today are infatuated with the biological determinants of things. They find compelling the idea that moods, tastes, preferences, and behaviors can be explained by genes, or by natural selection, or by brain amines (even though these explanations are almost always circular: if we do *x*, it must be because we have been selected to do *x*). People like to be able to say, I'm just an organism, and my depression is just a chemical thing, so, of the three ways of considering my condition, I choose the biological. People do say this. The question to ask them is, Who is the "I" that is making this choice? Is that your biology talking, too?

The decision to handle mental conditions biologically is as moral a decision as any other. It is a time-honored one, too. Human beings have always tried to cure psychological disorders through the body. In the Hippocratic tradition, melancholics were advised to drink white wine, in order to counteract the black bile. (This remains an option.) Some people feel an instinctive aversion to treating psychological states with pills, but no one would think it inappropriate to advise a depressed or anxious person to try exercise or meditation.

The recommendation from people who have written about their own depression is, overwhelmingly, Take the meds! It's the position of Andrew Solomon, in "The Noonday Demon" (2001), a wise and humane book. It's the position of many of the contributors to "Unholy Ghost" (2001) and "Poets on Prozac" (2008), anthologies of essays by writers about depression. The ones who took medication say that they write much better than they did when they were depressed. William Styron, in his widely read memoir "Darkness Visible" (1990), says that his experience in talk therapy was a damaging waste of time, and that he wishes he had gone straight to the hospital when his depression became severe.

Louis Menand, "Head Case," in *The New Yorker*, March 1, 2010, p. 74.

What if your sadness was grief, though? And what if there were a pill that relieved you of the physical pain of bereavement—sleeplessness, weeping, loss of appetite—without diluting your love for or memory of the dead? Assuming that bereavement “naturally” remits after six months, would you take a pill today that will allow you to feel the way you will be feeling six months from now anyway? Probably most people would say no.

Is this because of what the psychiatrist Gerald Klerman once called “pharmacological Calvinism”? Klerman was describing the view, which he thought many Americans hold, that shortcuts to happiness are sinful, that happiness is not worth anything unless you have worked for it. (Klerman misunderstood Calvinist theology, but never mind.) We are proud of our children when they learn to manage their fears and perform in public, and we feel that we would not be so proud of them if they took a pill instead, even though the desired outcome is the same. We think that sucking it up, mastering our fears, is a sign of character. But do we think that people who are naturally fearless lack character? We usually think the opposite. Yet those people are just born lucky. Why should the rest of us have to pay a price in dread, shame, and stomach aches to achieve a state of being that they enjoy for nothing?

Or do we resist the grief pill because we believe that bereavement is doing some work for us? Maybe we think that since we appear to have been naturally selected as creatures that mourn, we shouldn’t short-circuit the process. Or is it that we don’t want to be the kind of person who does not experience profound sorrow when someone we love dies? Questions like these are the reason we have literature and philosophy. No science will ever answer them.

Louis Menand

From The New York Review of Books

On Isaiah Berlin: Explorer

There seems a deep human tendency to seek one true answer, to search for the ethical equivalent of a Unified Field Theory. For Kant, there is the categorical imperative; for the utilitarians there is happiness. “Monism, and faith in a single criterion, has always proved a deep source of satisfaction both to the intellect and to the emotions,” Berlin notes, but he warns against it. And then he concludes “Two Concepts” with one of the most elegant passages I know of in the literature of ideas:

It may be that the ideal of freedom to choose ends without claiming eternal validity for them, and the pluralism of values connected with this, is only the late

Nicholas D. Kristoff, “On Isaiah Berlin: Explorer,” *The New York Review of Books*, Volume 57, Number 3 · February 25, 2010. www.nybooks.com/articles/23670

fruit of our declining capitalist civilization: an ideal which remote ages and primitive societies have not recognized, and one which posterity will regard with curiosity, even sympathy, but little comprehension. This may be so; but now skeptical conclusions seem to me to follow. Principles are not less sacred because their duration cannot be guaranteed.

Indeed, the very desire for guarantees that our values are eternal and secure in some objective heaven is perhaps only a craving for the certainties of childhood or the absolute values of our primitive past. "To realize the relative validity of one's convictions," said an admirable writer of our time (Joseph Schumpeter), "and yet stand for them unflinchingly is what distinguishes a civilized man from a barbarian." To demand more that this is perhaps a deep and incurable metaphysical need; but to allow it to determine one's practice is a symptom of an equally deep, and more dangerous, moral and political immaturity.

That passage always takes my breath away. Partly that's because it recalls the judgment of William Butler Yeats: "The best lack all conviction, while the worst/are full of passionate intensity." We all have seen examples of smart, knowledgeable people so crippled by nuance and tolerance that they make excuses for what is wrong and become ineffective as agents for change. Berlin argued that one must acknowledge the possibility that one is wrong, that one must recognize the complexities of a situation—without letting appreciation of nuance emasculate one's capacity to make strong moral judgments.

Nicholas D. Kristoff

From *The Eighth Day*

Roger had not felt so lightheaded since the days he had made his way to Chicago, hungry. A feeling of something portentous and strange in human experience had been gathering within him. He felt as though he had walked all his life in ignorance of abysses and wonders, of ambushes, of eyes watching him, of writing on clouds. It came to him that surely life is vaster, deeper and more perilous than we think it is. He dropped the envelope and bent over to pick it up. He was suddenly filled with fear that he would go through life ignorant—stump ignorant—of the powers of light and the powers of darkness that were engaged in some mighty conflict behind the screen of appearances—fear, fear that he would live like a slave, or like a four-footed thing with lowered head.

Thornton Wilder, *The Eighth Day*, (New York: Harper Perennial, 1967), p. 427 & 435.

There is much talk of a design in the arras. Some are certain they see it. Some see what they have been told to see. Some remember that they saw it once but have lost it. Some are strengthened by seeing a pattern wherein the oppressed and exploited of the earth are gradually emerging from their bondage. Some find strength in the conviction that there is nothing to see. Some

Thornton Wilder

From *What Matters Most*

The modern Greek poet Cavafy imagines Odysseus toward the end of his journey. Remember the odyssey we all began: Summoned as youngish persons to a foolish adventure, bloodied by life as we all are, sooner or later we yearn to come home, wherever it may be. Thus Odysseus is our archetypal comrade. In a poem titled "Ithaca," the home toward which Odysseus persists, Cavafy wonders what the storm-tossed mariner might think when his battered barque pulls at last into the harbor. Will this village of mud huts, these people who scarcely know him after twenty years, really prove "home" when one has been thrust upon the wine-dark sea for so long? Will it be possible for such a voyager to settle into an easy chair, open a six-pack, and watch the ball game the rest of his life? Cavafy concludes with this unbidden advice to the mariner that "Ithaca" was never the goal, really; rather Ithaca's gift was to give him his journey, with all its painful richness, from which, "you must surely have understood by then what Ithacas mean." What gives our journey also gives us our home, our richness, our meaning.

James Hollis

From *Memoir From Antproof Case*

I was graduated from the finest school, which is that of the love between parent and child. Though the world is constructed to serve glory, success, and strength, one loves one's parents and one's children despite their failings and weaknesses—sometimes even more on account of them. In this school you learn the measure not of power, but of love; not of victory, but of grace; not of triumph, but of forgiveness. You learn as well, and sometimes, as I did, you learn early, that love can overcome death, and that what is required of you in this is memory and devotion. Memory and devotion. To keep your love alive you must be willing to be obstinate, and irrational, and true, to fashion your entire life as a construct, a metaphor, a fiction, a device for the exercise of faith. Without this, you will live like a beast and have nothing but an aching heart. With it, your heart, though broken, will be full, and you will stay in the fight unto the very last.

Mark Helprin

James Hollis, *What Matters Most*, (New York: Gotham Books, Penguin Group USA, Inc., 2009), p. 255.

Mark Helprin, *Memoir From Antproof Case*, (New York: Avon Books, Harcourt Brace and Co., 1995), p. 254.

Critical Background

From *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography*

If the supreme value for the twentieth-century American imagination is *individualism*, based on economics and property, that for the first-century Mediterranean imagination can be called, to the contrary, *groupism*, based on kinship and gender. And there were really only two groups—the familial and the political, kinship and politics—to be considered. But we have, precisely against both those groups, biting aphorisms and dialogues from the historical Jesus. There is, first of all, an almost savage attack on family values, and it happens very, very often. Here are four quite different examples. Each has different versions available, but I give only one version for each example. The first one is from the *Gospel of Thomas* 55, the second from Mark 3:31-35; the third from the *Q Gospel* in Luke 11:27-28 but with no Matthean parallel, and the final one from the *Q Gospel* in Luke 12:51-53 rather than in Matthew 10:34-36.

(1) Jesus said, "Whoever does not hate father and mother cannot be a follower of me, and whoever does not hate brothers and sisters...will not be worthy of me."

(2) Then his mother and his brothers came; and standing outside, they sent to him and called him. . . . And he replied, "Who are my mother and my brothers?" And looking at those who sat around him, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother."

(3) A woman from the crowd spoke up and said to him, "How fortunate is the womb that bore you and the breasts that you sucked!" But he said, "How fortunate, rather, are those who listen to God's teaching and observe it!"

(4) "Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division! From now on five in one household will be divided, 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 her daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law."

John Dominic Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography*, (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1994), p. 58-60.

At the Workbench: Pentecost 12, Proper 15

The family is a group to which one is irrevocably assigned, but in those first two units, that given grouping is negated in favor of another one open to all who wish to join it. And the reason those groups are set in stark contrast becomes more clear by the third example. A woman declares Mary blessed because of Jesus, presuming, in splendid Mediterranean fashion, that a woman's greatness derives from mothering a famous son. But that patriarchal chauvinism is negated by Jesus in favor of a blessedness open to anyone who wants it, without distinction of sex or gender, infertility or maternity.

It is not just a center of domestic serenity; since it involves power, it invites the abuse of power, and it is at that precise point that Jesus attacks it.

Finally, it is in the last aphorism that the point of Jesus' attack on the family becomes most clear. Imagine the standard Mediterranean family with five members, mother and father, married son with his wife, and unmarried daughter, a nuclear extended family all under one roof. Jesus says he will tear it apart. The usual explanation is that families will become divided as some accept and others refuse faith in Jesus. But notice where and how emphatically the axis of separation is located. It is precisely *between the generations*. But why should faith split along that axis? Why might faith not separate, say, the women from the men or even operate in ways far more random? *The attack has nothing to do with faith but with power.* The attack is on the Mediterranean family's axis of power, which sets father and mother over son, daughter, and daughter-in-law. That helps us understand all of those examples. The family is society in miniature, the place where we first and most deeply learn how to love and be loved, hate and be hated, help and be helped, abuse and be abused. It is not just a center of domestic serenity; since it involves power, it invites the abuse of power, and it is at that precise point that Jesus attacks it. His ideal group is, contrary to Mediterranean and indeed most human familial reality, an open one equally accessible to all under God. It is the Kingdom of God, and it negates that terrible abuse of power that is power's dark specter and lethal shadow.

John Dominic Crossan