



Roanoke, Virginia

August 17, 2025

“A Strange Fire”

Luke 12:49-53

George C. Anderson

The passage I will read is a prime example of how Scripture can sound one way in isolation and quite another when heard within the larger story. Read by itself, it sounds like Jesus is having a bad day—foul, combative, almost spoiling for a fight. It’s as if someone told him, “[Calm down,](#)” and he snaps back, “[Calm down? I’m not going to calm down. You need to hear this!](#)”

Listen:

“I have come to cast fire upon the earth, and how I wish it were already ablaze! I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what constraint 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! 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.”

My granddaughter Emory loves the children’s Bible she received at her baptism. We’ve read every page together. Now, that may sound impressive—until you remember the huge font and bright pictures, and the curated stories—shortened and selected for age-appropriate content.

It probably won’t surprise you that this passage did not make the cut.

After Emory and I read about Jesus calling disciples, forgiving enemies, healing the sick, feeding the thousands, and teaching the Lord’s Prayer—what he says in our passage would feel wildly out of character. It doesn’t sound like him.

- Is this really *Mary’s gentle son*, stirring up family division?



- Is this the *Prince of Peace*, setting the world on fire?

But adults outnumber children in this sanctuary and adults read passages that don't show up in storybook Bibles, and this passage does come in handy sometimes—especially when it is time to stir up what John Lewis called “good trouble.” It's a good passage

- for disrupting the status quo,
- for speaking truth to power,
- for justifying protest.

It pairs well with Jeremiah's warning, spoken twice—in chapter 6 and again in chapter 8:¹
“They have treated the wound of my people carelessly, saying, ‘Peace, peace,’ when there is no peace.”

So, *not a misreading*: Jesus' words do have this edge. Think of those sit-ins, freedom rides, and civil rights protests—many called the participants “agitators” and “troublemakers.” But it was the peace of Jim Crow that needed to be disturbed. Friends and families were split—some clinging to the way things were, others refusing to wait for justice. Love, when it insists on truth, can be divisive.

There is a place for sermons that call us to that kind of holy disruption—and this passage can rightly be called upon when they are preached.

But that's not the sermon I'm preaching today. I want us to hear these words in the flow of Luke's Gospel. Jesus isn't reacting to some petty argument. He's not lashing back at someone who wants him to “[calm down](#).” He's preparing those who are with him for what is ahead of them. And what is ahead is the great disruption of Jesus— *being Jesus*.

Karl Barth once said, “[Jesus is the crisis of the world](#).”

He saw that the life and witness of Jesus inevitably collides with every human system—no matter how noble. No government, no tribe, no institution—no church—perfectly aligns with the kingdom of God of which Jesus is King. And sooner or later, his way disrupts their way.

That doesn't make Jesus an anarchist. He

- pays taxes,
- honors his family,
- attends synagogue.

But he doesn't hide who he is—or what he's about. And so, inevitably, his life becomes a problem that must be dealt with. Jesus “[has turned his face toward Jerusalem](#),” Luke says—which means he's determined to go there even though he knows that his going will cause disruption

That's the tension in this passage. They are not yet in Jerusalem, but they're getting close. Jesus is not lashing out in irritation. He's telling the truth to those who are with him:

¹ 6:14 and 8:11



“What I represent is going to clash with what the powers in Jerusalem represent. And it’s not going to go well.”

Like Jesus on the road to Jerusalem, let’s pause here for a moment to reflect and get a little perspective. We all know what awaits Jesus in Jerusalem—his arrest, trial and death. But let’s remember that the trouble Jesus causes does not always lead to a crucifixion. Jesus kept upending the way Peter saw things over and over, and Peter ended up loving him even more because of it. So, did

- Zacchaeus,
- and the woman at the well,
- and a Roman centurion,
- and a woman caught in adultery.

We might all know what that is like. We’ve all had moments when Jesus would not let us go our merry way—when he disrupted us to heal and save us.

But let’s also be honest. Sometimes, what Jesus represents isn’t always welcome, not when he gets in the way of revenge, power, or profit.

And Jesus knows it. He can feel the pressure building. His mission is becoming intolerable to powerful people. The fire is catching.

So, the question for us becomes: *What is it about Jesus that feels like fire instead of comfort??*

It’s a vital question—because in every generation, Jesus is found to be a problem. In every age, the Gospel exposes what the world would rather leave alone.

And these days—let’s admit it—ugliness of spirit has become common currency.

- Ugly speech.
- Ugly politics.
- Ugly behavior.
- Ugly policies.

And instead of being hidden in shame, this ugliness is too often

- Paraded.
- Celebrated.
 - Retweeted.
 - Reposted.
 - Rewarded-

despite it causing its own division within family and among friends.



There is something beautiful about Jesus that Ugly just can't handle—
that what is addicted to power, vengeance, and fear
can't handle.

And over and over again, we have to choose between the beautiful and the ugly
because the world forces us to choose,
and because *the right choice is what the world needs*.

This is what Brian Zahnd says in his book, *Beauty Will Save the World*. He argues that the beauty that gets Jesus crucified is the very beauty that saves the world. It is the beauty that draws people genuinely to Jesus—not airtight logic or moral superiority. Beauty. The kind of beauty that awakens something deep in the human soul that saves them from their own ugliness.

And what does that beauty look like?

- It looks like blessing the poor.
- It looks like honoring the merciful.
- It looks like calling peacemakers children of God.

It's the beauty of a God

- Who washes feet,
- Who heals enemies,
- Who welcomes outcasts,
- Who carries a cross.

Not sentimental.

Not saccharine.

Fierce beauty—

the kind that refuses to play by the rules of domination,
revenge,
or tribal loyalty.

And that's what makes it so divisive.

Because the beauty that is Jesus exposes our ugliness:

- The ugliness of scapegoating
- The ugliness of vengeance disguised as justice
- The ugliness of manipulative power pretending to be strength
- The ugliness of indifference to the suffering of others
- The ugliness of shaming the weak to protect the strong.

And this is important. Look how Jesus causes trouble with what is beautiful. He doesn't condemn the ugliness from the outside—there is not divine scapegoating, virtue signaling, cancel



culture here—he enters the ugliness. He goes right into it. His beauty walks straight into our brokenness and says, “**I am human too and this is not who we are. This is not how it has to be.**”

When we truly follow Jesus, we will clash with a world that prefers convenience over compassion. His cross becomes our cross—not because we seek controversy, but because beauty disrupts what’s ugly.

Zahnd puts it this way:

“**The crucified Christ is how God is revealed to be beautiful. But this beauty is scandalous to the powerful and foolish to the proud.**”

Let me offer something personal—and perhaps relatable that reflects how beauty comes with a cost because of the trouble it causes. Morgan Harper Nichols writes:

You ever notice how the world drains the people who feel the deepest,

The wise with soft hearts

Who carry the heaviest loads

Not because they are weak

But because they refuse to become what hurt them?

What we don’t talk about enough is the emotional tax of being good in a selfish world.

You show up with love, they show up with agendas.

You give to build, they take to survive.

It’s like speaking a language, no one wants to understand anymore.

You speak soul, they speak convenience.

And then you’re left wondering, “**Is something wrong with me?**”

No, there is something right with you—

but right doesn’t always feel rewarding at first.

Having a good heart comes with consequences.

You will be underestimated.

You will be misused.

You will be overlooked by people who confuse your peace with passivity.

So, stop expecting people with shallow intentions to handle your heart like it is sacred.

It is not their job to protect it.

It is your job to guard it—without guilt.

Sisters and brothers, we as a church community are called to the *impossible task* of being the Body of Christ in the world. Impossible, because no community—no matter how faithful—fully lives up to his beauty. But after 27 years among you, I can say with conviction that Roanoke and the world the world needs this church.

Why? Because the beauty of Christ has been visible here.



- In the grace you extend to each other.
- In the compassion you show to the most vulnerable.
- In the steady, faithful way you bear witness to love that costs something.

I'm especially grateful that in recent years, we've grown deeper in our outreach to those at risk—because something unmistakably beautiful shines through it. And our world is starved for that beauty.

- Yes, some may call us naïve for believing that God is revealed in Jesus.
- Yes, some may scoff when we share instead of hoard.

But bearing witness to the beauty of the Gospel is healing. It is hopeful.

And it draws us—and others—into the kingdom that creates a crisis in our world—because it is a kingdom where arrogance, greed, vengeance, and hate—
have no place.

Yes, bearing witness to the beauty of the Gospel causes division.

But it's the cost of a prayer being answered:

"Thy kingdom come, on earth as it is in heaven."

Charge at the Conclusion of Worship:

Sisters and brothers in Christ,
the world does not need more noise, more anger, more fear.
It needs light. It needs mercy.
It needs the kind of goodness that glows in the dark.

So go and **be beautiful.**

Be beautifully bold in your love.
Be beautifully stubborn in your compassion.
Be beautifully patient, generous, forgiving.

Let the radiant grace of Jesus
shine in you like fire
until all that is ugly is undone
and the world sees again
how beautiful God truly is.

