

Three years ago, my daughter moved out to Los Angeles, California. She had always wanted to live out there. She talked about the fantastic weather they have year round. UCLA has a great reputation for higher education. People in California are concerned about looking good. Eating the right foods, staying in shape. Something she liked. And then there is Hollywood. The great night clubs, and mingling amongst the stars. Life will be good in California. A perception. Well, my impression of Los Angeles is a bit different. Yes, the climate is beautiful, and that ocean view along the coast is breathtaking. But that's where the positives end. There is a haze of smog over LA which is unhealthy. And if you want to learn to hate your car, just drive on the 405 anytime during the day from 8:00 A.M. until 7:00 P.M. My daughter's roommate was rear-ended only 1 week after moving to LA. Further, when I went to a local grocery store, to take some bottles back for some cash, I was told they didn't accept them, because they had sanitary laws, and I would have to drive 40 minutes to a redemption center, to get my \$3.00 for my bottles. And this is a state that prides itself by being green. I just ended up tossing out those bottles. And then there is the cost of everything. My daughter's car failed the smog test, and had muffler problems. I won't tell you how much that cost my wife and me. Housing costs. They are in the stratosphere. It is not as glamorous as many think to be the LA Lady. It's not easy to live in California. Right now I am glad she moved back to Michigan for year.

What kind of things have you thought to be glamorous or easy, and found out it wasn't what you expected? As Christians we sometimes feel we can just hang out in our own little world, and no one will bother us. After all, God loves us and has promised to take care of us, right? It should be easy to be a Christian. However, we're going to learn today that all is not easy in the kingdom of God. It wasn't easy for Jesus, and it won't be easy for us.

I wonder if the Disciples weren't a bit shaken when they heard Jesus speak the words of our text. After all, Jesus made everything look so easy. He hardly broke a sweat when he walked on water or raised the dead. And yet Jesus said: "I have a baptism to undergo, and how distressed I am until it is completed" (Luke 12:50). The baptism that Jesus was alluding to was not like his first baptism. It didn't involve water, nor did his Father speak from heaven at this baptism. This was a baptism of fire that led to Jesus' abandonment by his heavenly Father. This baptism was nothing less than his appointment with hell and punishment for our sins on the Good Friday cross.

We've all had appointments that made us feel anxious – when we were a kid, getting our wisdom teeth cut out by the oral surgeon. Or as a retiree, getting that major crown at the dentist. But that's nothing compared to the dread that Jesus experienced in waiting for this baptism of fire. When we go to the oral surgeon we do so because it's for our good, and we may take a friend with us to lend support and encouragement. When Jesus kept his appointment with the cross he did so because it was good for us, not for him and he went alone, jeered by his enemies, abandoned by his disciples, and rejected by his heavenly Father. While Jesus shuddered at the thought of going to the cross he did not shrink from it. And thank God he didn't. Because Jesus was whipped for the times I grumble about doing my chores; because he was spat upon for my hesitancy to forgive; because he was crucified, I have peace with God (Romans 5:1). My sins won't condemn me come Judgment Day because in Jesus they have been forgiven, and so have yours. I don't suppose we would expect anything less from someone who was prophesied to be the "Prince of Peace" (Isaiah 9:6).

Yet it wasn't just the end of his life that was difficult for Jesus. Jesus did not grow up in a privileged family. His stepfather was a tradesman, working hard with his hands all day long

making things out of wood. You can be sure that Jesus worked alongside of Joseph as a child. He probably even had calluses from working around the shop. He probably had to complete chores before he could go out and play with his friends just like you do. Even after Jesus became popular in the first year of his preaching things weren't easy for him. He didn't own a home or drive a fancy car. He didn't even receive a salary but had to rely on others to provide food and shelter. Then there were the religious leaders who ridiculed Jesus and finally brought about his death. No, things were not always easy for Jesus in the kingdom of God. Should it surprise us then that things aren't always easy for us Christians? It shouldn't especially when Jesus said: "I have come to bring fire on the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! Do you think I came to bring peace on earth? No, I tell you, but division "

That sure doesn't sound the way the Prince of Peace should talk, does it? While Jesus came to make peace for us with God by earning forgiveness, he did not come to make life peaceful. That's not surprising when you consider the nature of Jesus' message. Jesus tells us that all those who believe in him will not perish, but that all those who do not believe will be condemned (Mark 16:16). There is no middle ground there. You either trust in Jesus alone for eternal salvation or you don't, for eternal condemnation. Therefore wherever the message of the cross of Christ goes, fires are ignited. When Jesus told the Jews that the only way to the heavenly Father was through him, they got hot. Tell that to a Muslim today and you'll get the same reaction. Or just tell your polite neighbor that the fact he has stayed out of jail his whole life and has never cheated on his wife is still not good enough for entrance into heaven. If he wants to be good enough for God, he needs to be as good as God. Even family members get upset when we say things like that. Yet that's just what Jesus prophesied: "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"

Yes, the cross of Christ and its message ignites fires wherever it goes. So if you can't stand the heat, should you get out of the kitchen? That's probably pretty good advice in most situations. But it isn't good advice when it comes to dealing with the fires that start because of the cross. Unfortunately, it's exactly the advice some Christians follow when the cross starts fires in their relationships and families. They don't like the heat so they get rid of the cross. No cross, no fire. No fuss, no muss. Everybody's happy. Who needs conflict anyway? Can't we just all get along?

Is that the way we think sometimes? If a friend of ours says something negative about Christianity, do we usually just change the subject? If somebody we know disagrees with what God says about sexuality and morality, do we clam up? If someone we love is staying away from church, do we figure that's his business or her business, not ours? If our child is shacking with her boyfriend, do we feel that if we take a stand, we will alienate her, and she will never come to visit us again. Yet listen closely to what Jesus said about doing that. "37 Anyone who loves his father or mother [son or daughter] more than me is not worthy of me" If we think it's better to keep the peace in the family than to share and live the truth about sin and grace and everything the Bible teaches, Jesus says that we have put our family members, really ourselves, before him.

There comes a time in life when you have to ask yourself, "what is more important - my principles and the salvation of a soul - or the temporary peace of a relationship?" Do you remember the story of Eli? Here was a guy who was blessed with two sons - Hophni and Phinehas - whom he was supposed to train into the priesthood. Yet Eli's sons were evil - sleeping with women who were supposed to be serving at God's temple - and taking some of the meat

that was supposed to be offered to God. Most kids go through some bad streaks at some time in their lives. But instead of earnestly going after them and addressing their sins, Eli was too afraid to really confront his sons. So what did God say to Eli? Why do you honor your sons more than me by fattening yourselves on the choice parts of every offering made by my people Israel? Are you so concerned about peace in the family that you don't want to "offend" anyone by trying to correct their behavior or their beliefs - you end up dishonoring your God. So Eli's sons ended up being put to death in battle - most likely under God's eternal judgment. God wouldn't allow that kind of peace. In today's text Jesus was saying, "I didn't come to bring that kind of a neutered peace. I came to bring fire and division!"

Jesus understood family division firsthand. Later on in His ministry, His own family heard about what He was doing and saying and "went to take charge of him," concluding, "He is out of his mind" (Mark 3:21). He later left his mother and brothers standing outside and said, "Whoever does God's will is my brother and sister and mother" (Mark 3:35). Yet Jesus had to "risk" His relationship with His own family - in order to spread the truth of salvation. His own brother - James - was not thought to have been converted until after Jesus' resurrection if I remember correctly. Jesus understood what it was like to risk his family to spread the Gospel of salvation. As always, our Lord never asks us to endure what He has not already suffered Himself. His faithfulness for us motivates and empowers us to faithfully follow Him to brighter days. God willing, we will keep that fire burning when and where it must.

People in ranch country have been taught from an early age the only way to escape from a range fire is to start a backfire. Burn a place out in the grass where you can safely stand as the range fire passes you by. On Judgment Day, when this world will be destroyed by fire, God has provided us a place where we can safely stand, a place where he has already poured out His white-hot anger over our sin, and that place is the cross of Jesus our Savior. Our Savior has already paid the punishment we deserve. Jesus Christ is our backfire. We stand in safety as the fire of God's wrath passes us by. When Jesus comes again on the last day, for us who have been given the gift of faith, it won't be as our Judge to destroy us but rather as our Savior, to welcome us into heaven. Be careful, brothers and sisters. Where there is peace, there may be no cross. In other words if our relationships with people who don't love the cross are always peaceful and peachy, it may be that we don't love the cross either. Jesus warned: "Woe to you when all men speak well of you, for that is how their fathers treated the false prophets" (Luke 6:26). We may all have a cross (or two) hanging in our homes, but do we have the cross hanging in our hearts? If not, that should be a concern, for where there is no cross, there can be no peace with God. For where there is no cross, there is no forgiveness.

No, all is not easy in the Kingdom of God. When you are suffering keep in mind our epistle lesson which encouraged: "Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart". Yes, consider Christ and the cross he suffered. He has filled you with forgiveness and he now fills you with his power. Let Christ permeate your words and your actions. Let him prompt you to witness to the people you love the most. If a fire ensues, so be it. The fire of battle that comes with the cross isn't nearly as hot as the fire of hell that comes without the cross. And when the fire of the cross frightens, fix your eyes on Jesus. He endured the fire of his cross and he'll see you through the fire of your cross. Amen.