

**Reflection, August 13-14, 2016, 20<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Ordinary Time  
Saint Joseph's Parish**

John Rietschlin

*"I came to bring fire to the earth and how I wish it were already kindled!"*

Do you wonder why Jesus wanted to set the world on fire? His words, and his tone sound pretty scary, don't they? Especially with TV images of Fort McMurray still fresh in our memories...thousands of people streaming out of town to escape the billowing smoke and the ravaging flames.

Of course, Jesus wasn't speaking literally of physical fire in this gospel passage. But what exactly WAS he saying? His language about bringing division to communities and to families seems almost as disquieting as the thought of a city in flames. Generally, we seek peace and harmony with those we love and with our neighbors and acquaintances, and even with the strangers who inhabit the planet with us. Why is Jesus, the Prince of Peace, announcing that his message will result in division and conflict even in the most intimate settings?

It is clear in this passage that Jesus is on fire; on fire with passionate love for the people surrounding him—poor and rich, Jew and Gentile, sinner and saint. Jesus is nearing the end of his public ministry, on his way to Jerusalem, longing to complete his mission. He has learned during these past three years that the message of love that he brings—love for all—is a source of division and conflict. The rich, the powerful, the authorities who are on top of the social order are threatened by this kingdom of love that makes the weak and poor their equals. The pious Jews are scandalized that Jesus welcomes Samaritans, and Romans, and tax collectors and adulterers into his company. His message of love is powerful—he is creating an alternative vision of how to live—a vision of the kingdom that his Father wants to bring to the earth. Some are touched, some are changed, even excited to be living this new and very counter cultural life.

But many are threatened. They are angry. Soon they will use their power to kill him—to bring an end to this madness. They will act to preserve the orderly, lawful way of life passed on to them from Moses and the prophets. ... or so they think.

I would like to suggest another perspective from which to read this gospel story. Most of you will be at least a bit familiar with the life and the work of Dr. Martin Luther King, the great American civil rights leader of the 1950s and 60s. King was a passionate follow of Jesus whose non-violent

approach to changing the racist society of his day drew an enormous following and eventually led to his assassination in 1968.

During his doctoral studies, Dr. King encountered the work of the theologian and philosopher Paul Tillich. Tillich believed that two basic drives are at work in each of us—these he calls power and love. For Tillich, power is the drive to achieve one's purpose, to get a job done, to grow. Love, on the other hand, is the drive to reconnect and unify that which is or appears to be fragmented or broken. Building on this core insight, Martin Luther King realized that power and love must always work together to effect real social change. In his words, "Power without love is reckless and abusive, and love without power is sentimental and anemic."

In the past couple of weeks, I read a recently published book by Adam Kahane entitled *Power and Love*. Adam is an organizer, designer and facilitator of change processes who has worked in every part of the world and every sector of society to address problems and conflicts.

Adam Kahane too has gradually come to believe that the dynamic of love and power is at the heart of beneficial change. As he puts it, the use of power without love leads to domination, manipulation, and oppression. Living love without power can be sentimental, anemic, and lead to passivity. In effect, love and power must go together to be healthy

In his book *Power and Love*, Adam argues that groups of people can only resolve difficult problems or conflicts when they bring both their drive for self-realization and their drive for unity to the table. When this happens, people acknowledge their interdependence; they learn to cooperate and to help one another; to find a way forward.

This model of love and power provides another perspective from which to read today's gospel. Jesus brings both love—the desire to see everyone united with him in God's kingdom—and power—the drive to ensure that the kingdom includes everyone, all equally loved by God. He is on fire with this vision of love and unity and is working passionately to attain it. Lives are being changed, but only a few can accept him—and the powerful, afraid to lose the social order that they know and their privilege in it—move to crush him.

But we know the next chapter of the story—Jesus is not crushed. He is risen! And he lives in us—through us. His love and his power are realized today when we love, when we act. And so we might ask, are we on fire? Am I on fire? Are you? Is the fire of Jesus' love and power living in us?

This week, I invite each of us to examine the fire of Jesus within us. Is my fire just a spark?; a small flame?; a raging bonfire? And let us ask Jesus to help us discern how we called to together live our love and our power to create the kingdom. And may we have the courage and the will to act on this call.

---

John Rietschlin  
August 14, 2016