

In the beginning, God created the Heavens and the Earth and populated the Earth with broccoli, cauliflower and spinach, and vegetables of all kinds, so Man and Woman could live long and healthy lives.

Then Satan created Ben & Jerry's Ice Cream and Krispy Crème Donuts. And Satan said, "You want chocolate with that?" And Man said "Yes!" and the Woman said, 'And as long as you're at it, add some sprinkles.'" And they gained 10 pounds. And Satan smiled.

And God created healthful yogurt that Woman might keep the figure that Man found so fair.

And Satan brought forth white flour from the wheat, and sugar from the cane and combined them. And Woman went from size 5 to size 14.

So God said, "Try my fresh green salad."

And Satan presented Thousand-Island Dressing, buttery croutons, and garlic toast on the side. And Man and Woman unfastened their belts.

Then God said, "I have sent you heart-healthy vegetables and olive oil in which to cook them."

And Satan brought forth deep-fried fish and chicken-fried steak so big it needed its own platter. And Man's cholesterol went through the roof.

And God created a light, fluffy white cake, named it "Angel Food Cake" and said, "It is good."

Satan created chocolate cake and named it "Devil's Food."

Then God brought forth running shoes so that His children might lose those extra pounds.

And Satan gave them TV with 500 channels and a remote control so Man would not have to toil changing the channels. And Man and Woman laughed and cried before the flickering blue light, ate snack after snack, and gained even more pounds.

Then God brought forth the potato, naturally low in fat and brimming with nutrition.

And Satan peeled off the healthy skin and sliced the starchy center into chips, and deep-fried them. And Man's blood pressure shot through the roof.

God then gave lean beef so that Man might consume fewer calories and still satisfy his appetite.

And Satan created McDonald's and double cheeseburgers. They asked, "You want fries with that?" And Man replied, "Yes! And super-size them!" And Satan said, "It is good." And Man went into cardiac arrest.

God sighed and created quadruple bypass surgery.

Satan created the Health Care System.

This saying of Jesus about setting fire on the earth and coming to bring division is one of the most misunderstood teachings in all of scripture. Because of this, from the time of Jesus' birth until this very day, we have been able to cloak a lot of our lack of charity, lack of respect, bitterness, and hatred inside the mantle of

prophecy, claiming that the divisions we cause are the divisions to which Jesus is referring when He said He is bringing fire to the earth. But we are wrong. Why?

First, the fire that Jesus passionately longs to bring to this earth is not the fire of division and polarization, but the fire of the Holy Spirit, the fire of Pentecost, which is the fire of love, joy, peace, goodness, understanding, and forgiveness. And this fire unites rather than divides. Moreover, in answer to His question: “Do you think that I have come to establish peace on earth?” the answer is: absolutely, without doubt. Jesus came precisely to bring peace to this earth, as the angels proclaim at His birth, as His entire ministry attests to, and as He powerfully witnesses to in His death. Jesus came to bring peace to the world; no one can deny that.

Then how does division enter? And why does Jesus tell us that His person and teaching will bring about polarization, hatred, and division? If the fire that Jesus brings to this earth is meant to unite us, why does it so often divide us?

Here are 2 examples. Few issues have so divided our nation as the legality of abortion. But for one church community, the plight of women experiencing difficult pregnancies is not a cause for judgment and condemnation but compassion and mercy. A group of women in the parish have assembled a network of services for pregnant women in crisis. They arrange for medical care, housing and whatever material and emotional support a woman may need. They work ‘under the radar’ – hospitals and physicians refer patients to them. If a woman opts out at some point, the group wishes her well and tries to stay in contact with her. Some have criticized their work as simplistic ‘do good-ism’ and some in the parish believe that these women should work instead for the legal banning of abortion. But they have taken to heart what Cardinal Blasé Cupich of Chicago said following the Supreme Court’s ruling in *Dobbs v. Jackson women’s Health Organization*: “This moment should serve as a turning point in our dialogue about the place an unborn child holds in our nation, about our responsibility to listen to women and support them through pregnancies and after the birth of their children, and about the need to refocus our national priorities to support families, particularly those in need.”

And another example: A few years ago, a couple and their 2 small children made the dangerous journey from their home in El Salvador to the United States. They made a new start in a small town: the father/husband labors picking crops in area farms; the wife/mother takes care of the household and takes in sewing. The family found welcome and support at a small church. When federal Immigration and Custom Enforcement sought them out, the church community provided them sanctuary. Volunteers created a small apartment for them in the church basement. Since the parents couldn’t leave church property for fear of arrest and deportation, parishioners signed up for weekly grocery runs, meal deliveries and laundry. Many in town – including some parishioners – made no secret of their anger at what they saw as the church condoning illegal immigration. But the parishioners who took this on were of one mind: for them, to be faithful to their Baptismal call to follow Jesus meant they had to help this family.

Jesus’ striking words in today’s Gospel are painfully clear: Jesus comes to proclaim a demanding Gospel of compassion, forgiveness and justice that is often at odds with the values and conventions of our world. The Gospel is not easy, it’s not comfortable; it’s challenging and demanding and, in its call for personal conversion, it can be divisive and confrontational, putting us and those we love on opposite sides of an issue. To live that Gospel faithfully sometimes means challenging the conventional wisdom of the time and even established public policy and law, requiring us to embrace a higher ethical and moral standard in confronting life’s challenges. Discipleship demands that we risk power, prestige and even acceptance to stand up for the equality, justice, compassion and reconciliation that every individual is due by virtue of being a son and daughter of God. (last 3 paragraphs from CONNECTIONS, August 14, 2022)

It is not Jesus who divides; it is how we react to that message that divides. We see this already at the time of His birth. Jesus is born, and some react with understanding and joy, while others react with misunderstanding and hatred. That dynamic has continued down through the centuries to this very day when Jesus is not only misunderstood and seen as a threat by many non-Christians, but especially when His person and message are used to justify bitter and hate-filled divisions among Christians and to justify the bitterness that invariably characterizes our public debates on religious and moral issues. Jesus still divides, not because His person and message are one-sided, divisive, or hate-filled, but because we too often use them in that way.

In effect, from the time of His birth until today, we have perennially used Jesus to rationalize our own anger and fears. We all do it, and the effects of this are seen everywhere: from the bitter polarization within our politics, to the bitter misunderstandings between our churches, to the hate-filled rhetoric of our radio and television talk-shows, to the editorials and blogs that demonize everyone who does not agree with them, to the judgmental way we talk about each other inside our coffee circles. We are all venting, mostly unhealthily, but forever under the guise of bringing the fire of love and truth to the planet. However, if the truth be told, more often than not, the fire we are bringing is more the fire of Babel than of Pentecost. Our moral fevers invariably bring about more division than unity.

There was a man in one of the parishes I served who had a blog that was really a hateful thing. I never read it, as I just don't ever read blogs as I have neither the time nor the interest. But from time to time people sent me what the man had written – often about me. It was NOT flattering to say the least. At one point, he asked to see me. I asked him “Why do you do this? What are you trying to accomplish? Do you think this is building up the Body of Christ?” And his response was “My gift is that I’m an agitator! I stir things up! I don’t let people get comfortable. I bring Christ’s fire! I’m prophetic!” He was certainly right about the agitation, the discomfort, and the fire. But few would call him a prophet. His approach to things and his rhetoric too much resembled that of an ideologically-driven talk show host who divides the world up too-neatly between angels and demons, absolute right and absolute wrong, and has a too-facile division as to who is on God’s side and who is on the devil’s side. That kind of talk is mostly bitter, hate-filled, one-sided, and highly divisive, but it justifies itself under the banner of truth and love, self-proclaiming itself as prophetic.

Daniel Berrigan rightly suggested that a real prophet makes a vow of love, not of alienation. It is easy to get this in reverse, and we frequently do. If we find our practice of our faith lacks respect, charity, and inclusivity, if it enflames us with bitterness and self-righteousness, it is not the work of Jesus but of a false spirit.

We want to make sure that our hearts are burning – but burning with the fire of Christ’s love, the only thing that will ever heal us – and our world. Amen. (body of this homily is adapted from Ronald Rolheiser, posting of 18 August 2013, “Rationalizing our Anger and Moral Indignations”)