

Most prefer unity and peace rather than conflict, yet such goals seem quite elusive. Unity literally means ONENESS. Peace denotes a CALM that comes from no distractions. But how in the world can such moments ever be?

Our culture is so divided. Each group demands that others accept their values and offer no resistance. That is called “living in peace.” But issues such as same sex marriage, legalization of drugs, immigration reform, taxes, the role of government, school policies, abortion, genetic modifications, euthanasia, foreign aid, morning after pills, and elections will never be issues that UNIFY but will always be symptomatic of the brokenness and selfishness of this world. Even churches compete with other churches.

Compromise might be a unifying strategy, but it runs counter to the selfishness of a broken world. Forcing anyone to accept someone else’s values and standards might end a discussion but will never lead to unity and peace – in fact, it usually will result in more conflict and greater disunity. It is a deception to think that “going with the flow” is what brings unity and peace for in reality it only moves the issue farther downstream and leaves the reality of different perspectives and needs alive and building resentment, anger and frustration.

What possibly can people find to unite them as “one?” You might expect the obvious answer to be “Jesus,” and yet what a surprise in our text today that Jesus says *“I have come to bring fire, I have come to divide!”* Such language scares us as we want discord and dissent, division and conflict to go away. What is up? This is confusing as we assume (at least in the Church) we can find an antidote for our daily conflict and tension

Isn’t the goal of being “Christian” translated as unity and peace? What then is this language of Jesus about division and fire? Let’s think this one through:

Fire changes everything it touches. Fire can destroy, but it also creates! Forest fires remove fuel for more devastating fires. Cancer cells must be “burned out” w/radiation to save good cells. Fire separates gold from impurities. The same fire that destroys chaff also turns wheat into bread! Fire divides and what is left is all that is left ... and when the fire is gone, there is peace.

Jesus says to be one w/Him IS to allow lives to be set *ablaze*; to be consumed; to be changed, just as fire leaves nothing it touches unchanged! Faith accepts God’s power rather than my reactions and excuses. Faith is letting his Spirit burn in me, and being separated from earth’s demands and instinctive selfishness.

*Faith not a game we play at when convenient, but repentance and new life! God makes himself one with us so that we might be one with him. Our unity with others has nothing to do with ME but with the God who is in me and is the same God in the faith of whoever stands next to me.*

*Without God as the unifier, there can be no unity. Without the fire burning out my selfishness and sinfulness, there can be no peace.* The world seeks a user-friendly faith, with a God that fits into our schedule and isn’t too demanding of our time or energy. Each individual decides what is important in their life and then asks God to give it and bless it and we assume that we know best what will bring unity and peace.

*So Jesus stirred up the pot -- turned up the heat -- challenged status quo. Rather than just pious phrases from comfortable distance jumped in!* He made the division between faith and unfaith clear and made himself the bridge to cross the gulf of sin and live in the kingdom of God's love.

He challenged traditions of religion by making himself unclean: touching lepers, comforting lost women, raising the dead, and washing feet. He broke ranks with comfort and security and accepted death we can't escape. Rather than compromise with Satan He entered into a battle on the cross and in the grave. Jesus lit fires in order to end the raging selfishness of sin! Just as fire fighters often light a "back fire" to remove "fuel" for a fire out of control, so Christ has come to burn away evil, selfishness, and death!

Take any situation you can imagine and realize that at its root is the brokenness of sin. This is, after all a broken and imperfect world. Why then do we expect that earthly laws, wisdom, or political pressure will bring unity and peace? The only true and unity peace comes only through the love and power of God.

Sometimes it IS DIFFICULT to know the answers. Some situations in a broken world will lead to imperfect solutions. But if we are one with Christ, his guidance will lead and his love will forgive. Christ has come to change us so that we will not be conformed to the evil that surrounds us.

What is being part of Christ's body other than to be filled with the fire of his Spirit? Will we be consumed by the fire of sin or fight fire with the fire of his love? Will we compromise his Spirit or celebrate the glow of his love?

Remember there could not be the peace of Easter without the battle on a cross and in a tomb! In that three day conflagration, Jesus destroyed the power of sin and death, and brought light to the darkest moment of life! *Peace simply for the sake of peace is surrender, but peace that is won for the sake of a righteous cause is lasting and worthy of our lives.*

The peace that passes human understanding is not an absence of pain or suffering or conflict or fear. It is the quiet calm that comes from being one with God, knowing that we can never be separated from that love. This is the only unity that will last, and brings a peace the world cannot give and or understand.

When we are "on fire" it means whatever we touch will be changed because our touch is filled with God. Just as God created by separating the darkness from the light, so creation continues in our lives as God's fire burns brightly, powerfully, and forever. That is true unity, and that is eternal peace!

Many struggles will come our way along as well as moments of calm and quiet. But more important is the reality that God has burned death out of our lives and filled us with the fiery passion of his love. That is what the fire of his love does!

It lights the path in front of our feet. It chases the darkness away. When I am one with God, I have peace no matter what rages around me, and my faithful living reflects that bonfire of love, which allows others to know Jesus through me.

What a gift is this passionate, bright, raging love of Jesus!