

Fire on the Earth

Luke 12: 46-49

Home Moravian Church, August 17, 2025 (Lovefeast for Aug 13)

What a joy to share table fellowship with the family!

And although many people in this congregation are actually related by blood through many generations—we see you, Leinbachs—I am of course referring to an even older genealogy. We break bread as the body of Christ, grateful for our shared spiritual DNA.

For a Moravian of the eighteenth century, “family values” valued something beyond the so-called nuclear family. “Focus on the family” focused on the Moravian community: what they called, in German, the *gemeine*. That focus is still evident in God’s Acre, where nuclear families are not buried together. Instead, we bury our dead according to our historical choir system—married sister by married sister, single brother by single brother—chronologically by date of death. When Non-Moravians ask me if I’d rather be buried with my family, I answer, “In God’s Acre, I *will* be buried with my family.”

Sometimes, the early Moravians divided one family to join another. In the oldest section of God’s Acre, every stone bears not only a name and dates, but the place each person came from. Everyone there left another place, and maybe another family, for this intentional community of Salem.

Even within the *gemeine*, division was part of life. One example challenging to contemplate is the raising of children in the “choir house” while their parents served in missions overseas. Some of those children grew up to write frank memoirs about their unhappiness. That’s something in our history to wrestle with.

Nevertheless, the division of families is biblical. You don't believe it, just read the gospel of Luke. In the *second chapter*, an old man named Simeon tells Mary that the baby Jesus "is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel and to be a sign that will be opposed ... and a sword will pierce your own soul, too." Maybe she felt a nick in her side twelve years later, when Jesus separated from his family to hang out in what he called his "father's house." Years later, Mary and Jesus' brothers showed up to see him and couldn't reach him through the crowd; when they sent word that his mother and brothers wanted to see him, Jesus' answer came back: "My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it." Surely that felt like a sword.

Luke's Jesus provokes division: among the priests in the Temple, among the teachers of the law, among the common people in the synagogue, and even among family members. Just a few weeks ago, our gospel reading from Luke's ninth chapter had Jesus telling would-be followers that following him came before family duty: *Don't go bury your father. Follow me and don't look back.*

And so we find ourselves today in the twelfth chapter, where Jesus says: "Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division!" It feels like some lectionary compiler's practical joke on Moravian pastors, on this day when we celebrate the festival of August 13, commemorating a powerful experience of the Holy Spirit that brought our quarreling forebears in Herrnhut, Germany, into unity. But, with Jesus' words ringing in our ears, let's talk about how, before they came into unity, our forebears had to survive a journey through holy division.

All of Herrnhut's first settlers came from somewhere else. Religious refugees, they had already experienced division, maybe as Jesus describes in today's text: "three against two and

two against three;... father against son and son against father,” and so on. So they headed for a place in Saxony, where the nobleman Zinzendorf was welcoming people of diverse religious practice: Lutherans, Calvinists, Schwenkfelders, pietists and dissenters claiming no particular identity, and some folks from Bohemia and Moravia whose outward practice was Roman Catholic but who had been attracted to the ideas of the Bohemian Brethren—to name a few. *How marvelous it will be, they all might have thought, when we join all these other people who are so passionate about their faith, to live together as the followers of Christ! What could go wrong?*

After all, these people read their Bibles. They had read in Acts about how the early Christ-followers were “of one heart and soul” and acted in perfect accord—a Golden Age of Christianity of which my church history professor, Bill Leonard, said definitively: “Never happened.” It sure didn’t happen in Herrnhut. As historian John Weinlick wrote: “More than once, the infant village was near shipwreck on the rocks of discord.”¹ On August 13, 1727, the division in Herrnhut would be addressed in a big way by the Holy Spirit; but well before that, the Spirit was moving. In particular, it moved the Herrnhut landlord, Count Zinzendorf.

Aware of the frictions and factions, Zinzendorf set about encouraging community. If you were here last Sunday, you heard Craig’s excellent summary of Zinzendorf’s work. For nearly two years, the Count devoted himself to conversation, prayer, the sharing of convictions, and the building of agreement in Herrnhut. In May, 1727, he presented to the residents a list of forty-two statutes that would guide the life of the community. Every household signed the agreement. It was the beginning of the Moravian tradition of the “Brotherly Agreement,” now called the “Covenant of Christian Living.”

¹ John R. Weinlick, *Count Zinzendorf: The Story of His Life and Leadership in the Renewed Moravian Church* (Bethlehem: Moravian Church in America), p. 69.

The statutes give us a pretty clear picture of things dividing the community. Some of those things have sparked conflict among neighbors since humans had neighbors: gossip, secret-keeping, envy, suspicion, social climbing—even life’s most prosaic irritations. Statute number 31, “A mechanic or tradesman ought to be most punctual in fulfilling the promises he has made,” remains relevant to this day.

But the Herrnhut community also divided over religious practice. They argued about the nature of Christ’s presence in Holy Communion, and the need to confess to a priest before the sacrament, and the right days on which to fast, and whether to fast at all. They had expected their beliefs to bring them together; instead, this faithful community divided over articles of faith.

To journey through this kind of division, the only way is down. To get through holy division into unity, the community of Herrnhut had to be willing to dig, and dig deep.

Because, below all the questions about practices of faith was a deeper one: What’s the right way to worship God? Below that: What does God want from us? Keep digging and the community might get all the way down to *Who is God, anyway?*

Jesus provoked division by asking his listeners to dig more deeply into their faith. The division Jesus provoked required his listeners to argue their questions out—with him, with one another, with God. Such arguing is fundamental to the faith in which Jesus was raised. For the Jewish community it is an act of faith to *question* God, as Job did when he felt unjustly used. It is an act of faith to *argue* with God, as we heard Abraham doing in a lectionary reading a few weeks ago, when God proposed to wipe out the city of Sodom. It is an act of faith to *wrestle* with God, as Jacob did in the 32d chapter of Genesis, crying, “I will not let you go until you bless me.”

If questioning and arguing and wrestling are fundamental to faith, they are also fundamental to religious community. The division Jesus provokes is holy because, paradoxically, it can bring people together—but only if those people take it seriously enough to wrestle with their faith and with each other.

If the people of Herrnhut needed to wrestle, Zinzendorf was their Spirit-driven coach. Guided by the Spirit, he helped them to stop wrestling to win, and start wrestling to understand. Like Jacob, they needed to wrestle until they got a blessing. That's the journey that took them through holy division, into unity. That is the journey that can take the church through holy division today.

Long have I wrestled with today's reading from Luke. How can Jesus say he didn't come to bring peace to the earth? It is the *gospel of Luke* in which the angels sing, "Peace on earth"! Could Jesus mean that he didn't come to bring a peace in which all questions about God are settled? Was that because God wants us always to be wrestling?

Jesus says he came to bring division in which "the inner thoughts of many will be revealed." On August 13, 1727, the Herrnhut community finally came through holy division into unity when the presence of the Holy Spirit gave them the strength, the courage, and the vulnerability to confess to one another and reveal their hearts.

As at Pentecost, the Holy Spirit also gave them the language. Remember how, at Pentecost, the Holy Spirit gave the disciples the ability to speak whatever language they needed to be understood? The people at Herrnhut may all have been speaking in German, but it was the Holy Spirit who gave them the language to communicate with each other, and come to understanding.

“I came to bring fire to the earth,” cried Jesus, “and how I wish it were already kindled!”

If it sounds like Jesus is wishing for earth’s destruction, remember that in the book of Acts, the Holy Spirit looks like tongues of fire. How eager Jesus must have been to see his disciples on fire with the Holy Spirit. How eager Jesus must have been to see the community of Herrnhut unified for his service. How eager Jesus must be to see the same in the church today.

May the Spirit give us the strength to journey through holy division. May the Spirit give us the courage, always, to dig deep and to wrestle. And may the Spirit bring the fire of Pentecost to the earth, and unify the family around the table, again and again, in the name of Jesus. Amen.