

If you've been to a few graduation ceremonies, chances are you've heard the keynote speaker or the valedictorian encourage the graduating class to go out and set the world on fire. Taken literally, these words would be an absurd challenge to become pyromaniacs or arsonists. But we know better. They're meant to inspire the graduates to go forth and conquer the world by being the absolute best at what they choose to do. They're sent out to accomplish great things and be pioneers in their respective fields. They're supposed to blaze a trail of financial success. Until preparing for the homily this week, I had never given much thought to where these words actually came from.

As we heard in our Gospel, they started with Jesus. He said to His disciples, "I have come to set the earth on fire, and how I wish it were already blazing!" These are strong words coming from the Prince of Peace and the meaning is quite different from the graduation speech. He's not so much concerned that we're the very best in our schools and our jobs or that we accomplish feats that will be recalled in history books for generations to come. He's not even concerned about how financially successful we are.

Jesus is talking about something much more meaningful, something more lasting. He's talking about the fire of God's love. It's a mission statement that's as appropriate today as it was during the time He walked this earth and spoke to the Apostles. The world wasn't yet ablaze at that time and, sadly, it's still not yet all ablaze with God's love almost 20 centuries later. There are many areas that are still cold and dark with power struggles, prejudice, and oppression. There are many places that used to be blazing that are now only smoldering. There are many hearts that still haven't been renewed by the fire of God's love.

That's where we come in. He's calling us to be passionate about our faith and our Christian hope. People should see a fire in us like they saw in Jeremiah in our first reading. He

opposed the sins of a whole nation and suffered persecution for it. People should see a fire in us like they did in the great cloud of witnesses referenced in our second reading from the Letter to the Hebrews.

We're all here today because we believe in God. We believe in Jesus' mission. But that doesn't necessarily mean we're on fire with God's love. Maybe we're just smoldering. Jesus tells us that we can't be just smoldering in our faith because when we are, we're more passionate about our sports teams and our hobbies than we are about our God. When we only smolder, we don't speak up when we hear lies and gossip being spread about others. When we only smolder, we look the other way when we see the Church under attack. When we only smolder, we shrug our shoulders when our seminaries and our schools struggle with enrollment. When we only smolder, we choose not to shed light on the darkness.

Our society's values may be confused, but ours don't have to be. Our culture may be morally adrift, but we don't have to be. Some people may be unsure about right and wrong, about what makes for deep human fulfillment, but we don't have to be. Some people may be indifferent to the dignity of human life, but we don't have to be.

Think about wood for second. At 499 degrees Fahrenheit, it's just smoldering. It's not until 500 degrees that it ignites. That one degree makes all the difference. Jesus wants us to go that extra degree and leave behind our fears, our biases, and our narrow-mindedness to be ignited with God's love. He demands more courage, more compassion, more humility than we believe we're capable of.

It's only by being on fire with God's love that we can destroy hatred, evil, and deception. It's only by being on fire with God's love that we can bring others back onto the path of a meaningful and fulfilling life. It's only by being on fire with God's love that we can love our

neighbor and build up a civilization of justice and love. Jesus wants us to be on fire in spite of the divisive consequences we heard in the Gospel.

Jesus calls us to the hard work of spreading the fire of God's love in our own time and place, regardless of the cost. To live the Gospel faithfully is to become a contradiction to those around us. The Gospel calls us to risk power, prestige, and even acceptance to live the mission we received at our baptism.

I know all this can seem like a daunting task and it can be hard to even know where to begin. Saint Teresa of Avila said that the devil likes to incite us to think about the great things we might someday do for God, and to forget about the good we can actually do right now. Just like the one degree for wood, the little things make the greatest difference. A tiny spark can set off a massive fire. We could do something as small as smiling at someone when we feel lousy, or offering a kind word when we feel like biting someone else's head off, or refusing to give into bitterness or hatred towards someone who's hurt us, and instead choosing to forgive that person. These little acts help to set the world on fire with God's love.

As we come to receive Jesus in the Eucharist in a few minutes, let's ask Him to set our hearts on fire with His love, and to give us the strength and courage to reveal that love in everything we do. Today, at this very moment, our Lord is inviting us to stir up the flames in ourselves and in others. He yearns to see the fire of God's love spread to all corners of the globe. Brothers and sisters, let's be the spark that finally helps set the world ablaze.