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Well, is everybody feeling really good about starting college after those readings? Somehow, I think that when the compilers of the Sunday lectionary chose the readings for the 20th Sunday in Ordinary time, year C, they were not saying to themselves, "Oh, these will be great for Welcome Weekend at Catholic universities! New students gathered with their parents and families, about to say their first big goodbye; these readings will be perfect!"

Jesus says he comes to bring not peace, but division, even among families? The University of Dayton prides itself in developing a strong sense of community, which we often describe as "family spirit." We believe God wants us to develop family spirit, including with the families of our students. So what are we supposed to do with these readings?

Well, God's word is too powerful to be rejected; it can't be ignored. So I guess we had better pay attention and listen carefully; we had better take seriously the truths that we find, even if, at first glance, we don't like them.

The first one is this: Sometimes, God's deep love, the radical love we find in Jesus, does bring division, even among family members. Jesus says "I come to set the earth on fire, and how I wish it were already blazing!" The fire that Jesus brings is the pure and complete passion of God's love for us. It is supposed to bring peace, of course, but our hardness of heart makes division an all too predictable consequence, an unintended side-effect, of the fire of God's love. People - like you and me - want their love to have predictable limits, so that the risks of faith don't go beyond their comfort zones. But when Jesus tells us to love our enemies, pray for our persecutors, forgive seventy times seven times, and to sell what we have and give to the poor, well, that's a little too much loving for people like you and me. It takes us outside the limits of comfortable, domesticated religion, and it brings division, even within families.

The history of Christianity is full of stories of people who, in seeking to follow Christ more closely, ended up at odds with members of their family. The earliest Christians often had to choose between their Jewish family and following Jesus, as various forces pushed disciples of Jesus out of the synagogues. St. Francis of Assisi famously stripped naked in the middle of the town square in front of his father and many others. It was a dramatic gesture of leaving behind his family's wealth and social class in order to pursue a life of radical poverty in response to Christ's call. Although this was a gospel inspired gesture, his father wasn't real pleased. His family thought he was crazy. Today he is the most popular saint in history, admired and loved even by many who aren't Christian.

Thousands of parents or families over the centuries were opposed to a son or daughter giving up marriage, children, grandchildren, the family business, a promising career or social status in order to embrace poverty, celibacy, and obedience as a way of following Christ in religious life or the priesthood. Other Christians, in whatever vocational state of life, have found themselves at odds with their families because of political positions they took in response to Jesus' life and teaching. Such has been the case for many Christian pacifists, including Catholics, who understand Jesus' call to love of enemies and prayer for our persecutors as prohibiting all Christian involvement in violence and war.
God's radical love goes beyond party affiliations and national boundaries. It isn't always good for family unity, public morale or national pride.

The prophet Jeremiah in the first reading preached God's word that the people of Jerusalem were being overrun by Babylon because of their infidelity to God. He spoke the truth. But the princes accused him of demoralizing the soldiers — not supporting the troops, in other words — and they tried to have him killed.

The second reading from the letter to the Hebrews reminds us that in the struggle against sin and evil, we have not yet resisted to the point of shedding blood. Plenty of people have shed their blood while resisting evil in Christ's name; they are part of the "great cloud of witnesses" which surrounds us and encourages us to resist sin and to persevere in running the race that lies before us. Last week the Marianist family remembered Blessed Jacob Gapp, a Marianist priest from Austria who was executed by the Nazi's in 1943 because of his persistent preaching about the evils of National Socialism and its inherent contradictions to Christianity.

Now, if you are like me, you are thinking: "Dang, this is still a little too heavy for Mass on Orientation Weekend, isn't it? I mean: the cost of discipleship in mid-August? It's too hot for this. It's not even Lent! I just want to make it through the goodbyes to my parents and the homesickness of the next few weeks." So let's talk for a bit about something closer to home: resisting the evils of college life.

The newfound freedoms of college life away from parents can be intoxicating, just to pick a word. There are some true evils to resist, and some good things to keep in the proper balance lest they become excessive and have an evil impact. And there are other very good dimensions of human life and the body which need to be carefully protected and cherished until a person reaches the level of full commitment appropriate for them. In the next four or five years your will-power and your moral compass will be called upon perhaps more than ever before in your life. Use them! Develop them, lest they shrivel and atrophy. You will never learn to resist great evils if you can't resist smaller ones. But don't underestimate the temptations of college life as "small" just because "everyone's doing it." Pray for God's guidance and strength.

Meanwhile, back at the 20th Sunday in Ordinary time, we might be asking ourselves: do I want to be the kind of disciple who lives Christ's call to love so deeply that it brings division? Do I want to resist evil, even to the point of shedding blood? Would I? Could I?

But I believe there is another question that comes before these, and it may be the hidden good news in our readings today: Do we want a God whose love is so complete and demanding that it brings division? Do we want a God who brings fire to the earth, and wishes it were blazing already? Actually, the real question is: do we want a God who is anything less?

What good is a god who is anything less than absolute love? What kind of a god is less than white hot fire and passion? What kind of a god is not able and willing to set the world ablaze in order to save it?

Do we want a lukewarm god who doesn't call us to resist sin and evil; who doesn't demand our all, our full love, our total gift of self? Do we want a god of compromise and mediocrity; a pretty-good god, something less than awe inspiring, not quite capable of either devastation or of salvation? I don't think so. We have got the mediocrity covered, all by ourselves. What we want, and what we need, is a God of fire and passion, who burns away our contaminating mediocrity, and leaves us purified and renewed; who brings new life from the ashes; who brings resurrection from death. We need a God who is all-powerful; able to embrace the cross without fear, able to take away death's eternal sting. We need a God strong enough to not be afraid to be gentle; strong enough to offer us complete mercy, because mercy can only be offered from a position of strength. The good news is that this is the God we have, if we are willing to accept it.

Perhaps that's why the Book of Revelation calls Jesus "the Lion of the Tribe of Judah." Perhaps that's why C.S. Lewis, in his children's series The Chronicles of Narnia, depicts the Christ figure as a lion named Aslan, who demonstrates that he is truly king of his reign by sacrificing himself for the sake of his subjects. But Aslan is no pushover. Despite the magnetic attraction of his wise and gentle presence, he is overpoweringly fierce and fearsome, especially when contending with evil. In the end, the final victory is his.

The word of God, and especially the wild and woolly Word of God become flesh, Jesus Christ, is a power which will accomplish the end for which it came, and which cannot be tamed, domesticated, or caged by human categories, including the family. Do we want a God who is anything less than a fearsome lion? Do we want a God who is not bigger than family and nation? I don't know about you, but I want a God who is, without doubt, the absolute Sovereign Ruler of all of the cosmos, and who is at the same time, the loving King of the tangled jungle inside my heart.

Only such a God is worth sacrificing for, worth resisting evil for, perhaps even to the point of shedding our own blood.

Only such a God is able to rescue us from the mud into which we have begun to sink, regardless of whether the mud is our own doing, or the result of what others, or terrible luck, have done to us.
So, as the second reading says, Let us not grow weary and lose heart. We have a God who comes to set the earth on fire with his love. And we are a people who embrace that fire, as we do the great Easter Vigil fire which dispels the darkness of death as the light of the resurrection. We light the candles as a sign of Christ's fire at every Eucharist and especially at Baptisms and funerals, both moments of dying and rising to new life in Christ. We cannot tame that fire, but it will transform us.

Let us pray that we will live as a people not afraid of the refiner's fire, but rather eager to immerse ourselves in it, dying and rising with Christ, again and again. Then, surrounded by the great cloud of witnesses, we will resist evil, the large and the small, gladly, for the sake of the joy that lies before us. And let us pray for our families, and for the human family. Keeping our eyes fixed on the Lion of the Tribe of Judah, Jesus, "the leader and perfecter of faith", and with our hearts consumed in his love, may we be healed of all division, love without limit, and glow, with all creation, in his fire.