

Wesley United Methodist Church

June 9, 2019

“Tenders of the Sacred Fire.”

Acts 2:1-8, 11b-21,

Today is Pentecost, the day of the Sacred Fire. It was less than two months since the crucifixion of our Lord. The apostles and followers of Jesus still spent most of their time in a borrowed room in Jerusalem. They were still too frightened to tell their story to the world. They were waiting for something to happen. They believed somehow God would give them a message of what to do and then give them strength to do it. They sincerely believed Jesus was to return and usher in the Kingdom of God.

It was the Jewish festival of Pentecost, so named because it fell 50 days after Passover. Jerusalem was crowded with tourists and religious pilgrims. With all the activity in the city, the followers of Jesus were probably even more frightened than usual. After all, if not openly persecuted by the holiday crowd, they certainly would be ridiculed. Then something happened which changed their lives and our lives.

As we read the account in the book of Acts, it is obvious Luke cannot find adequate words to describe the event. “Suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a mighty wind and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit...” It was nothing less than the power of the living God, the Holy Spirit, coming into the midst of the followers of Jesus.

It is important to note that while Luke has difficulty wrapping words around the Holy Spirit in order to show us a recognizable shape, he speaks clearly about the result of the coming of the Holy Spirit. These terrified followers of Jesus were transformed into courageous witnesses of the Christ. From men and women too afraid to appear on the city streets, these people were transformed by the coming of the Holy Spirit into fearless preachers willing to sacrifice their lives. Peter, the apostle who denied he even knew Jesus on the night of the Masters’ arrest, took his stand on the curb of a Jerusalem street and preached a sermon so convincing that 3,000 people were converted to the cause of Christ.

These were the events of the day of Pentecost, the birthday of the Church of Jesus Christ. It is the day God entrusted the tending of the Sacred Fire of the Good News to the people. The fire burned brightly in Jerusalem that day. But it was not God’s intent for this sacred fire to stay there. By the power of the Holy Spirit, the followers of Christ spread the fire to the whole world. It was first taken from Jerusalem to the Palestinian hills of Judea and on to Samaria. In only a few years it spread through Asia Minor to Antioch of Pisidia, Pergamum, Smyrna, Ephesus, and Galatia. In a dream to the missionary Paul, God gave him the word to take the fire of the faith to Europe. The Sacred Fire of the faith began to burn in Corinth, Athens, Philippi, Thessalonica, and on to Rome, capital of the empire. The apostles tended the fire carefully and passed it to those who were not apostles. The first generation passed it to the second generation. The second generation passed it to the third and they tended it for the fourth. In less than 100 years the Sacred Fire of the Gospel of Jesus Christ was carried as far as Spain to the west, India to the east, and Ethiopia to the south. It took several hundred years for the Sacred Fire to arrive in the northern parts of Europe, but it did. Down through the centuries the flames of the fire burned brightly. The Christian faith gained and its ranks grew because people who were attracted to the Sacred Fire had their lives changed. When people were filled with the power of the Holy Spirit, they came to know that peace that passes all understanding.

The followers of Christ were known to demonstrate enormous courage under duress. Roman authorities tried to stamp out the church by persecuting those who claimed Christ as Savior. The plan backfired. Those who were torn apart by wild animals in Roman arenas for the entertainment of the emperor and his entourage faced their deaths so courageously that others were attracted to the faith rather than repulsed by it. The early church quickly gained standing as faith communities where people treated one another differently. “See how they love one another” was a well-deserved reputation that attracted people to the church. The caring character of Christians showed itself particularly in the treatment of the sick. Disease, plague, and epidemic were commonplace.

The population of a city could be devastated by an untreatable infectious disease. The ordinary people frequently became threatened by the pestilence that they abandoned their sick, when nursing care might have saved them. Christians were different. Their commitment to Jesus Christ translated into the religious duty and care for the sick and dying. And for that matter, the teachings of the faith made the life of the Christian meaningful even in the midst of surprising and sudden death.

Those who adhered to the Christian faith founded hospitals and orphanages and schools and established other social agencies. People noticed how the Christian faith could turn a person’s life around; how the faith moved people to treat one another in love; how Christians seemed to be motivated to get involved making a difference in the world; how

people in the Church of Jesus Christ seemed to demand the best of themselves and the world around them. Uncounted millions were attracted by the light when the Sacred Fire burned brightly in the Church of Jesus Christ.

At other times the Sacred Fire was reduced to a glowing ember of what should have been. There have always been those who get the message twisted. Too many times people have killed one another in the name of Christ. There has always been a handful of corrupt religious leaders and terrible injustices perpetrated in the name of the faith. Unfortunately, not everything done in the name of Christ or by his church has been just, beneficial, or even moral. Yet in every generation there have been committed people, saints of the church, who faithfully tend the Sacred Fire of the Good News of what God did and continues to do in Jesus Christ.

Eventually, Christian people brought the Sacred Fire to the shores of the New World. There were Congregationalists in Massachusetts, Catholics in Maryland, Calvinists in New York, Anglicans in Virginia. The Sacred Fire of the faith was carefully tended and taken from generation to generation until it was brought to this town and to this street. A spark flashed in this community. A faith community was born and the flames quickly spread through this neighborhood. Even though this is a faith community that came together from other congregations, we are tenders of the Sacred Fire. The charter members knew, of course, that they were doing something that must continue beyond their present generation. As George Hamilton Combs put it, "What we begin, others will complete."

Each pastor has taken a turn as lead tender of the Sacred Fire for the building of this church. And now the fire has been handed down to us. We must tend it carefully and prepare it for those who will follow. The task is probably no greater for us than for any other generation but know this: We cannot take the future of our congregation for granted. Enormous challenges confront Christ's Church today. All around us we see the evidence of the trivializing of religion in general and Christianity in particular in America. There is the fact that religious belief and practice are excluded from serious public communication in America; that we treat religious faith as if it nothing more than some sort of optional hobby; that as a nation, we seem to have forgotten that strong religious institutions are safeguards against the intrusive power of state in our lives.

A case can be made that the flames of the Sacred Fire do not burn as brightly as they did in the 1950s. And this is happening at a time when the nation faces a serious spiritual crisis. We see the symptoms all around us. We think the problem has something to do with education, but it is a spiritual crisis that is at the root of schools graduating students who cannot read. It is a spiritual crisis, not a sociological phenomenon, that is at the root of families falling apart because people cannot maintain lasting, respectful relationships between husband and wife, between parents and children. We think it has to do with politics, but at its root, it is a spiritual problem that government has nearly ceased to function because of gridlock and that people really believe it can fund the functions of government through state-sponsored gambling. It is a spiritual problem when the fear of crime is never far from our waking thought. And certainly, our spiritual crisis is the cause of the fact that the nation is so radically divided, and we are terrified of those who are different. As the church, we need to address this crisis of the human spirit with the good news of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. We are the tenders of the Sacred Fire of faith. We need to continue to build here a community of faith which is concerned to reach out to this neighborhood, to this city, to the world. To do that, we will probably need to find new ways to be the church. The present generation does not necessarily want to do things exactly as the last generation. In fact, we know that the big issue is change.

The congregations that make the necessary changes to reach the present generation are those that will be strong enough to pass the flame to the future. Having said that, I also need to say that the most important things will never change. We need to maintain here a church that is concerned to be a place where people can experience the presence of God. We will do that in our relationship with one another. Fellowship has always been important to the practice of our faith. We will also do that in the hearing of the Word of God, in the study of the scripture, in the preaching of the Word, in the hearing of sacred music, people have always caught the fire of faith.

On this Pentecost Sunday, we celebrate the birthday of the Church of Jesus Christ. It is a time we remember and give thanks for those who have tended the Sacred Fire of our faith and have passed it down through the generations. It is also a time for us to pray the presence of the Holy Spirit that we will have the courage and strength to tend this fire and pass it to the next generation. And when we come to the end of our watch may we be able to say what Combs said, "What we begin, others will complete."