

## SET ON FIRE

Acts 2:1-21

One June evening, just past dusk, a little boy was playing outside his home when he noticed some fireflies. He was fascinated by their brightness, and so he ran inside the house and excitedly asked his dad, "Daddy, what makes the fireflies glow?" His dad, not sure how to answer, said to his son, "I really don't know, son. Why don't you ask your teacher at school?"

The boy was not discouraged by his father's non-answer but simply ran outside to admire the fascinating creatures some more. He tried to catch one. Several times he swatted at them with his hands but missed; but then his hands clapped together on both sides of one's flight and it squished between his palms. Making a face as he felt the mashed insect's body between his hands, he slowly opened them to see the wasted creature. To his surprise the dead firefly was still glowing in the palms of his hands.

Excitedly, he ran back into the house, yelling, "Daddy, Daddy, I found out what it is that makes the fireflies glow!" His dad, pleased that his son had figured out the answer to his own question, asked, "And what is it, son?" "It's the stuff inside!" he replied proudly, showing him the palm of his hand. "The same thing is true of followers of Jesus Christ. What is it that gives us that glow? The answer is simple. It's the stuff inside."

For many this was the first full week of summer vacation. Gypsy Hill Park began its roster of summer events with the first Prayer and Praise in the park. Marquis Memorial was well represented by our outreach/evangelism committee with a prayer tent. Summer is generally a time of making great memories, and if we went around the sanctuary this morning, I would guess we could spend the remainder of our time together sharing summer memories of our childhood. Memories of swimming at the beach or favorite swimming hole, memories of going fishing, bicycling, roller skating, or camping. Memories of cookouts, s'mores, parades and carnivals. Among some of my fondest childhood summer pastimes was catching fireflies.

Fireflies are winged beetles, and are also known as lightning bugs, or even glowworms for their visible use of bioluminescence during twilight to attract mates or prey. Fireflies produce a "cold light", with no infrared or ultraviolet frequencies. This chemically produced light from the lower abdomen may be yellow, green, or pale red, with wavelengths from 510 to 670 nanometers. Or you could say, they have a fire in the belly.

It was always a stellar night when we spied our first fireflies of the summer. This joyous occasion always found us running back into the house to find that empty peanut butter jar, punching holes in the lids, which were still metal back then, and running back outside to capture as many as we could in one jar. We would then set them along the stone wall surrounding the corner field and watch our own private light show. Ah, those were the good old days when simple pleasures thrilled our youthful souls. Last night at home, I took notice of the fireflies, Hudson took notice as well and with great effort attempted to capture the blinking bugs his jaw snapping shut each time with very poor results.

The disciples on that first Pentecost were the light show. Today we are celebrating and remembering that first Pentecost, the anniversary of that first-century day when the Holy Spirit came in a mighty way upon the disciples of Jesus hunkered down in an upper room in Jerusalem. The Bible's description of the sudden infilling of those disciples with the Spirit includes this: "Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared

among them, and a tongue rested on each of them.” Ever since then, fire, which, of course, is a source of light, has been a symbol of the Holy Spirit.

The fact that these tongues of fire rested on each of Jesus’ followers on Pentecost is a way of showing that *when the Spirit fills us, we, too, radiate the light of God*. Thus, Spirit-filled Christians are light-bearers. And over the centuries, Christians have “glowed” with that light as they have spread the gospel, shared the good news, gone about doing good, committed sacrificial acts of love for neighbor and even for enemies, and have sought to understand and do the will of God.

In some of Jesus’ subsequent followers, that light of the Spirit can be almost visually seen. Several years ago, after the English writer Malcolm Muggeridge spent some time observing Mother Teresa working in Calcutta, India, taking care of dying people she plucked off the streets, he wrote a book about her he titled *Something Beautiful for God*. In it, he said, “God’s universal love has rubbed off on Mother Teresa, giving her features a noticeable luminosity, a shining quality.” In most of us who follow Jesus today, the light within us may not be quite that apparent to others, but when we confront darkness in our lives, we often become conscious of how the way of the Lord is the primary light of our lives.

Too often it seems as if there is indeed more darkness in our world today than light and I confess to you that I am guilty of becoming literally so consumed and distracted with the darkness, that I forget about the light of the Holy Spirit which came at the first Pentecost to set the Disciples on Fire. Like you, I need to be reminded that God is in control. We stifle the Holy Spirit with negativity and fear of the future. We need to be so reminded that the church is alive and well today not because of us, but in spite of us.

You see, there is nothing that can stop God from being God. That elusive third person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit, continues to move in and through God’s people when we are receptive and open to going where God wants to lead us. Four years ago right before Pentecost, a dear Baptist colleague of mine posted an article, yes on Facebook, but it struck a deep, deep chord within me. The title of the article is “Five Ways Churches Inflicted Pain on Themselves.” Listen to the following excerpts.

Let’s be clear: The much-heralded “decline of Christianity in America” isn’t about God losing faith in humankind. It isn’t about losing our moral compass thanks to whatever you happen to loathe. It isn’t about fickle millennials. It isn’t about becoming a slave to trendy worship or having a death grip on traditional worship. In fact, I would argue that Christianity isn’t in trouble at all. Churches are in trouble. Denominations are in trouble. Religious institutions like seminaries are in trouble. Professional church leaders are in trouble.

But churches can’t hold God hostage. God will do what God will do. Whether our churches stay open for business, God will keep on loving all that God has made. Loss of an institution won’t deter God. So, let’s relax about Christianity – the faith – going down the tubes. This isn’t a crisis for God or faith in God. Even if every church in America went dark, God would try another way.

The tragedy is that we did this to ourselves, and we hurt many people along the way. Here is what we did:

### **1. We stopped trying.**

For a time, religious institutions in America were bold risk-takers. Then we settled into maintenance mode, because it felt safe and comfortable. We fought over churchy things that didn’t matter because

the things that did matter — racism, inequality, demagoguery, corporate thievery, obsession with money, and sex — cut too close to home.

## **2. We stopped giving.**

Over the past 50 years, our giving has dropped by more than half as a percentage of family income. We have starved our churches of resources. When tough budget choices had to be made, keeping the doors open and preserving church buildings usually defeated the mission that God wanted. New ministries suggested at church meetings were and are routinely met with the phrase, “who is going to pay for it? Or “where are we going to get the money?” thus effectively ending any and all forward moving conversation.

## **3. We turned inward.**

Just as American houses went from porches in front to patios out back, we stopped connecting with our neighbors. We stopped looking outward, except for the occasional token charity. We opened our doors on Sunday and welcomed each other, ignoring much of the cries of our neighbors.

## **4. We fixated on Sunday morning.**

Long after Sunday changed character in American life, we kept expecting one hour on Sunday to do our work. Rather than transform lives through outreach mission work, Sunday school, Bible Studies, Youth activities and personal spiritual practices of prayer, fasting, giving and simplicity, we had people sit in pews for a crammed hour of singing, praying, announcing, chatting, communing, and learning. Then we sent people out to their cars and figured we had done our work for the week.

## **5. We trashed our reputation.**

We became known as judgmental, angry, self-serving, smug, boring, and old. As far as people outside can tell, we live to fight, we think too highly of ourselves, and we are moral scolds. Who needs that?

What, then, is the future? The future for God is as bright and glorious as ever. Our ever-dynamic, ever-loving, and ever-transformational God will be just fine. We can say our prayers with confidence.

Churches, on the other hand, are in trouble. Many will run out of money. Many will lose heart. And yet some, perhaps many, will rise to the challenge. They will give up “what we have always done” certainties and do what Jesus did.

Those who will meet the challenge will look outward, proclaim good news, welcome strangers, serve “the least of these,” give their lives and resources away, work for justice and mercy, be faith communities seven days a week, and put love ahead of being right and kindness ahead of victory. And God will be in the midst of them. (End of article)

WOW!! I had truly forgotten about this article. Yes, it is a bit harsh and it certainly does not mince any words. For you who are hearing it for the first time it probably is stomping on some tender toes; so, it is very important for you to know that this is not directed to Marquis Memorial, but to the general state of affairs with Christianity in America. The bottom line for me, however, is the message of hope that as we celebrate the Birthday of the Church – its’ 2000+ years birthday, God will keep on doing what God has been doing all along. God will keep on loving all that God has made.

There are times when your Pastor needs encouragement – times when I need to be reminded that God still sits on the throne. Pentecost Sunday is an excellent time to be reminded that if God can put fire in the belly of his first disciples who had been cowering in fear, God can certainly set our hearts on fire. I don't have to do this on my own. The same power of the Holy Spirit is available to each one of us here this morning. We simply have to be open to allowing God free reign in our lives – even if it means pulling us out of our comfort zones. We want to be the church as long as it suits our budget, fits our lifestyle and doesn't require us to step out of our comfort zone. Thank God for all the saints of the church who have gone before us who were willing to risk all for Christ – and I believe Marquis Memorial shares that same proud history of believers willing to risk all for Christ.

So what Pastor Tizzy...how do we make sense of the Holy Spirit and what does the Spirit mean for our day to day Christian walk?? Well, the correct theological response to this question is that it is the Holy Spirit that convicts you and me of our need for a Savior.

In reality, the work of the Holy Spirit is far more versatile – consider the following:

He is like a breath that blows away the dust and makes everything clean.

He is like refreshing cool water to a parched throat.

He is like a cleansing brush fire that burns away all the thick undergrowth so that something new can rise out of the ashes.

He is like a potter who starts with an odd-shaped lump and molds and shapes it into something beautiful.

He is like a renovator who uses what is already there and strengthens, refreshes and revitalizes what's there.

He is like a loving spouse whispering reassurances of love and support.

He is like a parent guiding and helping a confused child.

He is like a tour guide who points us in the right direction to see things that we would otherwise have missed.

He is that gentle tap on the shoulder that makes us realize, "Hey, that's me that needs a new beginning and new direction."

He is that fierce shaking that wakes us up; reminds us that there is more to life than earning money, relentlessly pushing ourselves until we are tired, stressed and depressed.

That is what the Holy Spirit does – he revitalizes, renews, refreshes, empowers, creates, he reminds, he guides, he comforts the church, those in the church and those whom he touches outside the church.

Come, Holy Spirit, dark is the hour,

We need your filling,

Your love and your mighty pow'r.

Move now among us, Stir us, we pray.

Come, Holy Spirit, Revive the church today!