

June 4, 2023

Let us pray.

O God of Love, O God of Truth;

Let us say strong things gently and gentle things strongly.

Let us speak the truth in love to all,
and love the truth that lives in each.

Let us hear the truth as we each need it and live that truth.

O God, we heed it through Jesus; Your Word & our Lord.

Amen.

Fighting Fire With Fire

Acts 2:1-12

“When the day of Pentecost arrived, all were together in one place. Suddenly from heaven came a sound like rushing violent wind, filling the entire house where they were sitting. Then the gift of speaking in tongues appeared among them, like fire. And a language rested on each of them. And all were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages as the Spirit gave them ability.

Now this day, there were devout Jews from every nation gathered in Jerusalem and the crowd was bewildered at hearing their native languages being spoken by (the disciples). Amazed and astonished they asked, ‘Who are these Galileans, that we hear them speaking to foreigners in their native language? Parthian, Mede, Elamite, Mesopotamian, Judean, Cappadocian, Pontus and Asian, Phrygian, Pamphylian, Egyptian, Libyan and Roman. Both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabians - hearing their own languages as (the disciples) speak about the powerful deeds of God. And all were amazed and perplexed, saying, ‘What does this mean?’”

In the same style The Apostle Paul
greeted the 1st C home church gatherings,
so I greet you: *“To all God’s beloved
in Dorset, Manchester and beyond,
who are called to be saints:
Grace to you and peace from God our Father,
and the Lord Jesus Christ.”*

Tis the season of Pentecost.
That time of year when we emphasize
the life and work of The Holy Spirit,
and celebrate the birthday of The Christian Church,
and try to reclaim that Holy Spirit.

Let me begin with this story.
There was a revivalist preacher
who tried to have a grand finale at his tent meetings.
He would hire a small boy
to climb the high center pole and perch there.
Then, at the end of the sermon,
when the preacher raised up his arms and bellowed,
“Let the Holy Spirit descend.”,
the little boy was to release a dove
to fly down among the congregation
to amaze them all.

But, at one particular revival meeting,

when the preacher cued the boy,
“Let the Holy Spirit descend.” - nothing happened.
So he shouted it again. But still no dove.

Then, from high in the shadows
came the sound of a little boy’s voice,
“Sir, the cat just ate the Holy Spirit.
Shall I throw down the cat?”

There’s a lot to swallow now-a-days
about the Holy Spirit.
We live in a time when so much spirituality
is flying around calling itself “Holy”.
We live in a time when many brands of preachers
religious, political, social,
claim to know and control the spirit of God.

In some Christian places in America and the world,
The Holy Spirit is celebrated more than Jesus himself.
The Holy Spirit has been equated to anything exciting
that happens in worship.
Any time folks feel inspired, think they hear God,
speak in garbled alien-sounding language,
handle snakes, faint in ecstasy,
experience miraculous healing,
they think, “Surely the Holy Spirit is among us.”

But let's consider this more deeply.

When Adolph Hitler gave rousing speeches
leaving tens of thousands of Nazis inspired
was that "The Holy Spirit"?
How could it be?

When indigenous shamans
deep in jungles perform healings;
tribal "priests" who have never heard about Jesus,
never read a single word of the bible,
and probably have scores of gods instead of just one,
is that the work of "The Holy Spirit"?
I wouldn't say it wasn't!

It's popular now a days, to hear,
"I'm not religious, but I consider myself to be spiritual".
By that they often mean seeking an inner peace,
having a mantra during meditation
to help de-stress from the rat-race of the world.
Or, communing somehow with Nature;
and, as the wind blows upon them high on a
mountain summit, or out in a boat in the ocean,
in that individualistic moment they feel
a spiritual presence they might call "Holy".
Is that the "Holy Spirit"?

Spirituality is everywhere.

Spirituality is where you find it and it find's you.
But is it all "Holy Spirit"?

The first hints of who and what the Holy Spirit is
can be found in the bible stories about it.
The Holy Spirit stories are different from others.
They are more poetic than prosaic.
They are driven by metaphor and full of similes.
"Like a violent rushing wind."
"Like a fire."
"Like a dove".

Straight away this tells us that The Holy Spirit
wasn't meant to be precisely defined.
At best it may be compared to things in nature.
And any theology of The Holy Spirit must honor
the mystery of God,
"And all were amazed and perplexed",
And any witness to the work of the Holy Spirit
should end with a question, not a statement.
'What does this mean?'

As I said, the Holy Spirit is captured best by metaphor.
And one of the metaphors that speaks clearest is Fire.
*Then the gift of speaking in tongues appeared among them, like
fire. And a language rested on each of them. And all were filled with*

the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages as the Spirit gave them ability.

Clearly something spiritually powerful happened.
And whatever Holiness touched them
they resorted to describing it like fire.

As we survey the condition of the church now-a-days,
there are 2 kinds of fire that entice us:
Wild Fire and Bon Fires.

Staying true to the original Pentecost story
what they described can best be compared to a wild fire.
That is to say, it spreads with a life of its own.
It happened from causes unseen or unexpected;
and certainly uncontrolled.
It surprised people, scared people, made them leave
the comfortable categories of life
throwing them into a spiritual adventure.

And wild fires burn out more than up.
They follow the contours of the land,
spreading along the grassroots systems of life.
And, as such, wildfires participate in resurrection.
Says Peter Wohlleben, in his absolutely delightful
book, *The Hidden Life of Trees*,
the natural cycle of wildfires helps trees

release their seeds more abundantly
and strengthen their production of resins.

And lastly, wildfires don't discriminate.
They are fundamentally democratic,
burning with equanimity and inclusivity.
Commonality is a core experience of holy wild fires.

Years ago I remember doing an outdoor wedding
where old woods and beautiful meadows met.
The couple and I crafted a ceremony
filled with words and rituals
that spoke to them and the variety of friends and family
who attended.

There were readings from ancient China.

There were rituals from Tibet Buddhism.

There were traditional Christian prayers & blessings

The day seemed electric with the Holy Spirit.

Afterward a man with a thick English accent
corralled me and said,

“This service was simply brilliant.

**If this couple had gone to my vicar
they would have been told,**

‘We don’t do that here.

You’ll have to get married somewhere else.”

The true work of the Holy Spirit
is meant to progress the flames of unity and love.
The richness of the Pentecost story is in how
it brought people together
overcoming categories of division.
embracing in spiritual one-ness
new people, diverse people,
even people once enemies.
The Holy Spirit is multi-cultural, multi-racial,
and as multi-faceted as all creation.

Now, let's consider a bon fire.
As much as I love bon fires,
the Pentecost story ISN'T one.
From start to finish, bon fires are controlled.
They are a controlled spectacles,
renown for their intense heat
radiating from one spot and seen for miles.

And how bon fires burn is interesting.
Their fuel is pre-existing. It is old stuff.
And it burns as long as someone keeps feeding it back
upon itself - whatever has fallen off or derelect.
Bon fires are self-consuming.

This describes many congregations:
burning off the old ways, old traditions,

living by the creed, **“This is the way we’ve always done it.”**

The heat of many congregations
comes from the same old people,
being fed back into the fire over and over again,
who look the same, vote similarly, have similar social
pedigrees, even dress and act similarly.

In bon fire churches, unity is replaced with uniformity.
One of the most indicting commentaries about church
came from Kenneth Dexter Miller,
President of the New York City Mission Society.
He called Sunday morning worship,
“The most segregated hour of the week”.

In addition, many modern congregations
are in hot pursuit of spectacle more than substance.
The kind that sends intense light and heat
straight up - to be seen by many with “oohs” & “ahhs”,
but misses the more grassroots burning
that generates renewal and resurrection.

And lastly, for many, Christianity is about control:
control by bible, control by orthodoxy, control by clergy,
control by tradition, control by bureaucracy,
control by denomination, control by finances.

And so, in closing, I ask you.

Which kind of fire does the world need more?

The kind that reaches out spreading unity and love?

Or the kind that burns from within and slowly
consumes itself?

That kind of fire that obliterates differences
so that all feel included?

Or the kind that celebrates, accentuates and
even protects differences

so that the world is further entrenched
in its divisions?

With which kind of spirit

should Christians and Christian churches be most afire?

The future of humanity seems to cry out

for the Holy Spirit of God

whose sacred ember

was, is and forever shall be, Jesus Christ the Lord.

Discussion Guide for Home Church Sermon entitled,
“Fighting Fire With Fire”

1. Think of Wildfires and Bon Fires as two ends of a spectrum. With Bon Fires being #1 and Wildfires #10, how would you rank The Dorset Church and why?
2. What does Wildfire Christianity suggest to you?
3. If the Holy Spirit is best described by wildfire, apply that metaphor to certain current events of today.
 - a. Immigration
 - b. Mass Media
 - c. The Social Welfare System.
 - d. Voting Rights.
 - e. LGBTQ issues.
4. Holy Wildfires burn before they renew.
Can you think of a time in your life an experience began with scare and suffering, and ended with new strength and growth.
5. Looking back on your experience of Covid, were there any Wildfire memories?
Were there any Bon Fire memories?
6. What will you take home from this sermon, for your own life and faith?

Prayer of Pastoral Care

O Lord, I pray the empathy of Christ will overcome the hard-heartedness of humans. The generosity of Christ will overcome the miserliness of humans. The justice of Christ will overcome the unfairness of humans.

But when it does not, help us bow down to the Gospel command: “to whom much has been given, much will be expected.”

As we celebrate all our friends and loved ones graduating let us welcome as best we can all who thirst for schooling and share our educational opportunities.

For, “to whom much is given, much is expected.”

As we worship freely today, help us defend the freedom of religion we often take for granted, from self-righteous people who would gladly trample it and the dictatorships who would gladly deny it.

For, “to whom much is given, much is expected.”

As we drive to church this morning amidst such natural beauty, help us protect the hidden workings of this planet from all the selfishness and thoughtless that threaten it.

Inspire our best remedies to combat our climate crisis.

For, “to whom much is given, much is expected.”

As we pay our bills, enjoy our festivities, reap our dividends buy our luxuries, let us know how wealthy we are in this land - from the 1% to the 99% and be “grateful sharers” individually & politically with any who live in emergency.

For, “to whom much is given, much is expected.”

*As we bring new babies into this world with such hope and good health help us prioritize accessibility to health care, physical and mental, with all “little ones” whom Jesus loved.
“For to whom much is given, much is expected.”*

*And in this spirit we pray for all on our church prayer list today.
READ PRAYER LIST.*

*So Lord, hear we sit and pray,
for counting and giving thanks for everything in our lives
that feels so much like a bless-ed gift, and bow to that
Gospel demand: “To whom much is given, much is expected.”*

