

Sermon - Matthew 28:16-20 Acts 2:1-17, 21-23, 32-33, 37-42 May 31, 2009

Where's the Fire? Or – Lord, Help Us Feel the Heat.

Today is Pentecost – and we mark it with red in remembering the fire like presence and power of the Holy Spirit. And this morning we have both our baptismal font, a symbol of our baptism with water and the candles a symbol of the indwelling of the Spirit in our lives.

Today is Pentecost and we call it the birthday of the Christian Church. But why? Because Pentecost came 50 days after Passover, and so 50 days after the resurrection of Jesus. It was at that time a high Jewish holy day – celebrating the giving of the ten commandments to Moses, and thousands of Jews came from all over the known world to the temple in Jerusalem.

And on that Pentecost Day, after the resurrection of Jesus, the Apostle Peter and 120 followers of Jesus met to pray and worship the Risen Christ. And something amazing happened. They were filled with the Holy Spirit, and led by Peter, they went out into the crowds to share the good news of God's forever love in Christ.

And – 3,000 people became believers – and were baptized – and all of a sudden there weren't just a few followers of Jesus, but instead, a large and growing number, a community of faith, the birthday of the Church.

Hear that story now.....from the Book of Acts

Please pray with me.

Lord, we need it, some sign, some new spark, some thing to warm our hearts and stir our souls and lift our spirits. May your Word, and my words, and the thoughts of these your faithful and loving people – turn up the temperature of our faith and make us stronger witnesses for your truth and your love that we know in Christ. Amen.

Here we are. And it is good, very good, that we are here. For here we can hear a good word that can, if we will let it, can guide us through the maze and moral mess that is our society.

And - our moral mess is more than the selfish greed that has so messed up our economy and damaged the lives of so many.

It's a school principal in Tennessee who recently noted that she can give out condoms and birth control pills in her school without parental knowledge, but cannot let a student pray in public.

It's the President's chief of staff calling Christians terrorists, simply because they oppose abortion on demand. And, to some extent, its legislatures in some states, that could recognize civil unions, as many states have begun to do, but instead give way to intense lobbying and so redefine what the word marriage has always meant.

And its Danica Patrick, the highest woman finisher ever in the Indy 500, when asked if she would take performance enhancing drugs if they could not be detected, said yes she would. We look for every edge we can in racing.

We now have GPS devices that can take us door step to door step with turn by turn navigation. But what have we done with the moral compass that can guide us into lives that are truly good and rich in kindness and love?

Where is the fire of faith that can so stir us that we will not only see and know what is right and good and true, but do it, and speak out for it?

Last Sunday I heard a southern preacher say – if the good news of God’s love for you in Jesus Christ doesn’t light a fire in your soul – your just damp word at the camp fire. Southern talk.

I know there is more than damp word at this camp fire. I know there is some warmth in this fellowship, some power of the spirit at work here. I’ve seen it in the care you help your church show and share in many ways.

I’ve seen it in your heart for Mission - for the Open Door, at Baldwin Center, at Fort Street – and next week – you again willing to open your doors to SOS – the South Oakland Shelter for the homeless.

I’ve seen it in the missions you support across the country and around the world, and in the commitments so many of you have made, sacrificial commitments, to secure the future of ministry here for years to come.

But - I also know this – that our passion for what we believe must be deeper, more vibrant, more visible, more obvious and inviting in the future than it has been. We can only grow, the influence for good of the Christian faith can only grow, as we share more winsomely and winningly our own faith.

So - I am pleased, glad you are here this morning, here with others touching base in this public way with the one who is the source of all that is or ever will be, with the one who is the creator, and sustainer, and redeemer of your life and mine.

But – I am troubled a bit, and bear some responsibility I know, for the fact that as we gather here we are really a pretty tame crowd of folk. There is warmth here, but a bit hard to spot a lot of people passionate to share their faith. There is not a lot that sets us apart – that as the children sang/will sing - lets the light of God’s love shine through our lives.

There really isn’t a lot of heat, a lot of fire. A depth of faith sharing. And I know in many ways its no real comparison, but I was thinking last night how much closer the crowd at the Red Wings game might seem to that crowd at Pentecost, than we seem to be here.

That sea of red rocking the Joe.... Afire with enthusiasm for - what ? Just a hockey game. No eternal values at stake there. No life affirming decisions being made. No question of living so that God's kingdom might come on earth as it is in heaven.

Just a game – and yet the place seemed on fire with passion and enthusiasm.

If we could muster just a little bit of that passion, that heat of enthusiasm, that commitment of resources – and it was no cheap thing to part of that crowd last night.

If we could be just a bit as passionate about our faith – which is of such far greater importance, our faith, which really is a life and death matter....

Maybe, maybe, if we were more passionate, we could make more impact for good on this corrupt society. Maybe - Maybe we think too much, and feel our faith too little.

Maybe we should do it like the Mormans do it, and some early Christians, too. And go two by two - to share our faith and see how the good news can touch troubled lives powerfully. Maybe we should shout and jump around more than we do....

Or maybe not. Maybe not. Maybe its not so much about a lot of noise and energy made in worship - some Baptists and Pentecostals do that better than we ever could – or maybe should – and they seem to be as lost as any of us in the moral mess of our society.

Maybe our faith catching fire, maybe its not all about noise and crowd excitement as it is about our willingness to draw closer to Jesus Christ and to be willing to feel the passion and the commitment, the real burning heart of his truth and his way of life.

Maybe our faith catching fire is most of all about taking very seriously Christ's call to us to be his witnesses with all we have and in all we do and say - and are.

I wonder, did you notice in the Scriptures this morning, how the last events recorded in Matthew's Gospel, at the end of Jesus' presence with his disciples, are very much like the first events in Luke's record of the events of Pentecost?

In Matthew the disciples are told to go to Galilee to meet with Jesus. And there Jesus commissioned them to share his message with the world - go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them – and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you - and remember – I am with you - always.

And in Acts, Luke writes, that just a few days later, back in Jerusalem, the disciples were together, maybe in the same place where they celebrated the Last Supper with Jesus. And there, as they worshipped, the Holy Spirit came upon them, and they were empowered to speak the good news about God's deeds of power in a way that could be understood by everyone.

Luke doesn't really describe anything like the Red Wings game and its craziness. He describes people at worship, with very likely, worship similar to our own worship - with prayer, and singing the psalms, and the study of God's word, and fellowship. Maybe a service like our communion services - no howling mob. But people open to the leading and the working of the Holy Spirit.

And the exciting, dramatic, world changing thing that happened, happened more powerfully then, more powerfully then than what happens here each week, is in part a result of who they were and where they were, and God's plan for what they would become. The noise, the sound of their worship, that rushing wind like sound, of their voices, spilled out from where they met into the crowded closed in city of Jerusalem and the people saw them and heard the words they were saying - and they were all astounded.

And the point of Pentecost seems to be - not as much about what happened in that room, in that worship, as important as it was that they were gathered, that they did worship, that they were open to the Spirit of God. What was most important, life changing, lives changing, world changing important, was what happened when they went out from that worship and shared the good news.

Peter and the others shared their faith, told others why they were followers of Jesus Christ. And - did you hear the heart of the message that Luke reported. As I read the passage several times over, I finally saw it, heard it, got it. The disciples shared their faith with other people - and - they said - save yourselves from this corrupt generation.

Save yourselves from this corrupt generation. In Matthew Jesus sends the disciples out to share the good news, and to teach people to obey Jesus' commandments. And at Pentecost the Holy Spirit, the living Spirit of the Risen Christ, moves the disciples to begin the teaching - to call people to live not in worldly ways of corruption - ways very much a part of Jesus' day - and - our days... selfishness, lust and greed....

But to live in Christ's ways.... To be people who - in the words we use here - Truly care for Christ and his teaching, and care for the Church, for each other, and care for the world, for others around them in need, for their welfare.

Maybe the message of Pentecost for us is not about whether we can see tongues of flame above each other's head, but rather, it is about whether or not, when we leave this place, because we have been together in this place, we can in some ways impress others with how much our faith means to us, how serious we are about loving God and loving and caring about everyone we meet, and even those we can only reach through the missions we support.

Maybe the challenge again this Pentecost, this Sunday, is for us to simply be better at being what we already are.. a community of people who've been convinced of God's love for us in Jesus Christ and are inspired by the Holy Spirit to care deeply for each other -

and as many others as we can. And to teach ourselves and others to obey all that Jesus taught.

And - what Jesus taught – that – and that alone can save us from this corrupt generation. To be willing to speak the truth in love - to – yes – speak up against every corruption or injustice or dishonesty we face. To resist those who would cheapen life.

And – by God’s grace – we have the opportunity to practice what our faith preaches and teaches - right now – this next week.

On this Pentecost and Christian Education Sunday we are pointed – thank God – to see and feel the spirit moving in our hearts.

Next Sunday we will, we can, meet and break bread together at the Lord’s Table - and to bring gifts for the Open Door - things needed by others in our community –

And we can demonstrate Christ’s care by how we welcome the homeless into our church home and into our hearts.

And yes.. yes... as we are able – by God’s grace and goodness to us - to commit what we can to help secure the future of Christ’s ministry here.

I see some flames this morning.... - I pray, I pray, that with you, I can answer Christ’s call, and Peter’s, and that of the Holy Spirit, that I can live with a bit more fire in my faith.

Lord, help me feel the heat. Amen.

David W. Robertson, Pastor