

Fire!

Shepherd's Grace Church

June 8, 2014

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. ²And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. ³Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. ⁴All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

⁵Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. ⁶And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. ⁷Amazed and astonished, they asked, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans?" ⁸And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? ⁹Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, ¹⁰Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, ¹¹Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power." ¹²All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "What does this mean?" ¹³But others sneered and said, "They are filled with new wine."

¹⁴But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them, "Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. ¹⁵Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o'clock in the morning. ¹⁶No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel: ¹⁷'In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. ¹⁸Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy. ¹⁹And I will show portents in the heaven above and signs on the earth below, blood, and fire, and smoky mist. ²⁰The sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon to blood, before the coming of the Lord's great and glorious day. ²¹Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved. (Acts 2: 1-21)

(Context: Today is Pentecost Sunday. Typically I preach in a more emotional and enthusiastic style. The message is intended to be a more "Fire and Brimstone" invitation to not only be filled with the Holy Spirit but to be moved by the Holy Spirit! Additionally, I have coordinated this message with Donnie

Huffman who will interrupt the preaching portion with three songs about the Spirit! Our lives seem frequently interrupted. I invite you to consider today that those interruptions are messages from God inviting you not only this morning but every moment into His hope for each of us...that we be available to the caprice and whimsy that allows for possibilities and purpose in our lives we could never have imagined. Welcome Holy Spirit! Set our hearts on fire!)

Fire! Even the word is image filled isn't it? When you hear the word, what is the first thing that comes to your mind? Perhaps now, in early June with the summer heat of Kansas starting to build you allow yourself to return to December and the memory of a cold night where you snuggle under a blanket in the presence of a warm fire that lights the room with a soft glow. Perhaps you allow yourself the luxury of stepping back in time to that old high school bonfire that was intended to build spirit and motivate the football team to victory in the big homecoming game! Fire can conjure all kinds of images that offer comfort and consolation to people who are experiencing both physical and emotional cold!

It is difficult to imagine that these are the images conjured by the disciples this morning but I remind you of their circumstances. They had just watched their beloved Jesus leave them in a cloud to be taken up to heaven. They had been in the presence of angels who assured them of his imminent return. They were preparing to celebrate the festival of Pentecost. The celebration occurs 50 days after the Passover as a reminder that not only does God lead them out of slavery and oppression but into the abundance of harvest. Perhaps the warmth and comfort of fire in these circumstances was an appropriate reminder of the eternal provision of a God who both loves and cares for them and continues to lead them to places of peace and possibility! *Fire* offers this kind of imagery and allows for constructive consideration of a future where God's Kingdom can be brought near. Perhaps this imagination of fire offers them opportunity to remember Jesus' early words to them when he first encountered him. "Repent," he said, "For the Kingdom of Heaven has come near!" (Luke 4)

Perhaps the image of *Fire* you consider this morning is an image of construction. Broderick is currently taking a vo-tech class on welding. When he sets up his welding station he puts on special clothing to protect himself from the intense heat he will be dealing with. When he lights a torch the heat from the flame can approach 4 thousand degrees. It has the power to melt metal and bond that metal with other metal to form other shapes and angles. The purpose of the *Fire* in this instance is to create bends and curves where none existed before. This construction allows for turns where only straight lines existed previously!

Curves and turns allow for change in direction. Could the disciples have imagined a change in direction as they experienced *Fire* this morning? Their lives had been predictable and peaceful after resurrection and in the presence of Jesus. With Jesus gone and their future less clear, could they have seen possibility for the *Fire* to heat and mold their lives in such a way as to change the direction they were going? In the bright hot glow of the fire that appeared above each of them, could they have anticipated being bent and molded into a stronger unit that would be able to withstand the stresses and pressures of a world still bent on personal gain guided by greed, lust and power?

Perhaps when you think of *Fire* this morning you imagine its potential for destruction. *Fire* is a powerful agent for destruction. Many of us have been aware of the wildfires out west this spring and then incredible numbers of acres of timber and woodland that have been destroyed. Houses were threatened and lives were placed in danger as people worked round the clock to save what they could. Billions of dollars of land and property were destroyed.

We can think of *Fire* in this context, as a destroyer of something distant and we can lose touch with just how devastating it is. When I was in second grade we had a house fire. My parents were out for the evening and the border who was going to college and living in our house was babysitting. Steve and I were asleep when at about 10 o'clock Sam came into my room and grabbed me out of bed. He walked back down the hall to Steve's room and did the same thing. He carried us, half asleep out of the house and to the neighbor's house next door. From there we could look out the window and watch as the firemen arrived with lights flashing and sirens screaming.

We watched as they poured water through the upstairs windows of our bedrooms and into the lower windows of our kitchen and living room. We waited anxiously for news of our dog who seemed to be nowhere to be found. We wondered if she would be OK and with each passing minute we made ourselves more frightened! We waited to see if our house could be saved and we wondered if our parents would ever get there. I cannot remember feeling so alone at any other single moment in my life!

The house was able to be saved. The dog was found and was safe. The contents of the house however, were almost a total loss. Our clothes, our toys, books, radios, everything we had was gone. The fire had destroyed it all and had left us with nothing. I wonder if the disciples felt this emotion as they experienced the fire on that day of Pentecost. Did they, for a moment think that the loss they experienced in watching Jesus disappear from their view leave them feeling as if they had nothing...that everything had been taken from them and they were totally alone in the face of the *Fire*?

I think the disciples felt all three of these emotions as they witnessed the tongues of *Fire* that hovered above them. They had been told to wait for the time when they were filled with a power from on high (Acts 1) and while they waited, with each passing moment they became more concerned with how God was going to use them!

They were indeed witness to the resurrection of Jesus but were they worthy witnesses? Judas was no longer with them but they knew he had betrayed Jesus. Peter had denied him and all of them had deserted him. Those who walked to Emmaus didn't even recognize him. Sure, they could say it was because he was disguised but in their hearts they knew they weren't even looking for him! They felt unworthy of being a part of an ongoing ministry where they, those who were cowardly and unconvincing would testify to God's grace and great love!

These disciples, all of them needed comfort, the comfort of a warm fire's glow to console them and allow them to escape into the dancing flames so they might forget the failures they had experienced. All of them needed a fire that would create for them a new path, one that would redirect their steps toward something they thought was lost. They needed something built for them that would change their course from despair to desire, from hopelessness to possibility! They needed the power of a *Fire* that would forge from the mountain of their mistakes a monument to God's grace! All of them needed to be reminded, just like I am reminded this morning that the destructive *Fire* of death can allow for resurrection to new life!

All of them!...All of them needed to experience the burn once more in their hearts and they were not feeling that burn! Jesus had gone. Hope had gone! Theirs was an aimless, senseless, seemingly directionless life that held no potential for ministry or for the mystery of God! They were gathered in one place and they had elected a replacement for Judas but they were waiting, watching wondering how God could possibly use them!

They needed *Fire!* They needed to feel the power of a burning passion, that same passion that brought about the creation of the world! They needed that spirit that invaded the chaos of the earth to invade the chaos of their hearts and construct for them something new, something alive, something with purpose!

When the fire came, it burned each of them, destroying their old self and beginning a new life. Like John the Baptist told them in Chapter 3, I baptize with water but the one who is come after me will baptize you with Holy Spirit and *Fire!* The *Fire* of the Spirit destroyed their old lives and created for them a new

life! Those who were useless on their own were now useful through the Power of God! Their hearts were on *Fire!* They were ready to share.

In their preparation the church was born! Let's be clear about this. The church was not born in the coming of the Holy Spirit! The church was born in the preparation of people who were less than saints so they might allow themselves to be used for God's purposes. God could have chosen any group of people to accomplish God's mission to the world but God chose this group of people! God chose a group of doubters, a group of deniers, a group of run-a-ways who fled at the first signs of trouble! God chose to use this people to make the church. He could have chosen anyone but God choose them.

The first one of them that God used was Peter! Peter! Peter, the one who denied Christ three times and even after the denial did not try to make right his mistake! God chose this one to stand up and speak to those who were curious, to those to whom Jesus had not spoken, to those who were in need of a witness! God choose Peter, the one whom the world would have thought the weakest witness of all to be the first witness to the Power of God! God put a fire in Peter's heart to stand before a group of people and preach to them, taking a text from Joel and demonstrating the continual involvement of God even in the lives of those who have never known God before! God could have chosen anyone but God choose Peter!

God chose Peter, the one who denied Him as the one to defend Him! God chose Peter, the one who abandoned his friends to stand and advocate for his friends. God chose Peter as the one to step forward and remind not only the people of every nation under heaven but the disciples as well that there is no greater gift than to lay down one's life for a friend! God could have chosen anyone but God chose Peter! He didn't want another person, one who did not have all the baggage Peter had. He didn't want someone who had always been a "yes man" or had always blindly followed! God didn't want another! God wanted Peter!

In the same way, God didn't want a people to wait for His Holy Spirit who were strong and sinless! God could have found or as Luke said through John the Baptist, could have raised up such people but God chose those who were huddled in a house waiting for the *Fire* of their passion to place a purpose into their lives! God used people who were beaten, broken and battered by the emotional loss of one whom they loved to become the church. God didn't want another church! God wanted this church! God wanted this group of doubters to become the first generation of believers! God didn't want another group. God wanted this group!

Throughout History God has chosen this same group. Through the persecutions, through the wars, through the dark ages and the plague God has consistently chosen people who doubted and had questions, people who struggled with their faith to become people who were leaders in their faith. God could have chosen any person or groups of people in the history of the world but God consistently chose these people, these groups of people! God did not want others. God wanted these!

Throughout history, God has chosen people who were less than whole to lead the world to a wholeness that would rely on God and not on their own devices. When Martin Luther saw a wrong in the way the church was relating to people, God used him to point out that wrong! God could have used others but instead :God used this one who struggled all his life to find a meaningful faith as a leader who would show “Faith Alone” to others who wanted to deny God’s grace as the only way to salvation! God could have used others but God wanted this one!

From Luther’s efforts a church was born! This church did not replace the old one but rather allowed for others to see the church as an instrument of social justice in the world and not merely a place to escape from the tribulations of day to day living. God could have chosen any church but God chose this one to invite the world into an understanding of justice that transcends the world.

John Wesley was concerned that people were being too casual in their faith. He wanted the church to demand more of them by encouraging them in small groups to involve themselves with one another and hold each other accountable. He saw the benefit of letting faith meet life as people involved themselves with one another and with those less fortunate than them. Wesley had no intention of starting a new denomination of Christian faith but, when faced with circumstances in the world he had no choice! The result of his efforts was a church born of conscience, a church that cares for people and encourages others to see those on the margins of our society as whole and important! God could have chosen any person to guide this church but God didn’t want any person...God wanted him! God could have chosen any church to lead the world to care and compassion but God didn’t want any church! God didn’t want another church! God wanted that church!

When there was a need in Arkansas City for a church to stand up for those who were hungry, God had 51 choices. He could have chosen any one of those churches to begin a meal ministry but God did not want any church! God did not want another church! God wanted this church. God called Shepherd’s Grace Church to minister to the needs of those in need of food! God knew that those coming to be fed were not just in need of food but fellowship and God knew this church could provide both! God could have chosen another church but God chose this one!

God knew our history! He knew we had come from brokenness and a place of separation. He knew the people He would send were also experiencing those same feelings. He knew we could minister to them with care and compassion and that we would be able to relate! He knew we needed a *Fire* of comfort that would allow us to feel safe and secure in our new work in the world and on a cold night of wintry wonder, God called this church into a warm place of comfort and care. God allowed the fire of our comfort and care to comfort and care for others who did not just need food but also fellowship and friendship. Some of those people have joined us in our ministry because of people with a heart on fire for their needs! God could have chosen any church but God did not want another church! God wanted this church!

God could have chosen any church in this community to reach out to the youth of the community. There are many who have ministries to our youth but God knew the youth He would bring here, he knew they would be young and fragile. He knew many would not have fathers living in the home and that some would not have mothers. God could have used the existing ministries of Arkansas City to reach out to these young people but God did not want an existing ministry. God wanted a ministry molded in a new way!

God wanted a ministry created of the *Fire* of change! He wanted a ministry willing to do things differently. He wanted the heat of our fire to mold a new image that would take these youth in a new direction. He wanted a ministry that would expose the youth of our community to other cultures...not just by words but by action. He wanted a ministry that would take the youth to visit other places and meet people who were different from them. God could have chosen any church...but God did not want another church...God wanted this church!

God could have chosen any church to lead the renewal project at Scripture Hill. Any pastor and group of people could have accomplished all we did in such a short period of time but God didn't just want our immediate accomplishment. God wanted a commitment to the future. God wanted people in our community to know that there is a future for God's relationship with our community. God wanted people to hear once again...to see once again that God comes for a relationship not only with those who are saints but sinners as well. God wants that message to be a message not from the past but from the future as well. For that reason, God called us to use the next generation to restore the message of past generations!

"Christ died for the ungodly," the words spoken in Rom. 5 are words of promise, not of past. God still has a plan for our community, for our country, for our world and Christ came not only for those who

believe today but for those who will believe tomorrow. Christ came for them even before they believed and even before they cared! God could have chosen any church to speak this message but God did not want another church! God chose this church!

Today we celebrate the coming of the Holy Spirit! We are no longer a people in need of the comfort of a warm glowing flame. As we receive the Spirit, we are that flame for others. We are no longer the people in need of the flame of a hot torch to build new paths. We are the new path, created from Fire and forged by the very hand of God! We have been created in God's image in order that we might share the new power given by God to the church, a body called to restore justice and compassion to the world!

Today we realize that the destructive flame of the world cannot destroy the creative Power of God! The house may be on fire but it is not burned down! It is instead made ready for new purposes, new passions, new possibilities! The Holy Spirit that comes to us now invites flames of purpose for this generation and generations to come! We are the Church. God could have chosen any church but God chose us! We are the church and we are on *Fire!* Amen!