

"It only takes a spark to..."

by Rev. Kara Swartz

May 19, 2013 (Pentecost)

Acts 2:1-21

1 When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. 2 Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. 3 They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. 4 All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them. 5 Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven. 6 When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard them speaking in his own language. 7 Utterly amazed, they asked: "Are not all these men who are speaking Galileans? 8 Then how is it that each of us hears them in his own native language? 9 Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, 10 Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome 11 (both Jews and converts to Judaism); Cretans and Arabs--we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!" 12 Amazed and perplexed, they asked one another, "What does this mean?" 13 Some, however, made fun of them and said, "They have had too much wine. "
14 Then Peter stood up with the Eleven, raised his voice and addressed the crowd: "Fellow Jews and all of you who live in Jerusalem, let me explain this to you; listen carefully to what I say. 15 These men are not drunk, as you suppose. It's only nine in the morning! 16 No, this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel: 17 " 'In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams. 18 Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy. 19 I will show wonders in the heaven above and signs on the earth below, blood and fire and billows of smoke. 20 The sun will be turned to darkness and the moon to blood before the coming of the great and glorious day of the Lord. 21 And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.'

Today is Pentecost Sunday, an important Sunday in the life of the church. 50 days ago we celebrated the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ with Easter. Today we celebrate the passing of the Spirit of Christ to us, his Disciples. I would like us to remember that we are Christ's Disciples, all that we do in worship and a lot of our faith foundations come to us because at the heart of our faith we are Disciples of Christ. Not only is this the name under which we declare our witness but it is also a large part of what we come to believe of ourselves once we have taken the steps of faith and declared our belief.

Pentecost literally translated in Greek means the 50th day. The name Pentecost was originally utilized to describe a prominent day for the Ancient Israelites for the feast celebrating the giving of the Law, as in the Ten Commandments. As you may be aware, our Christian calendar often coincides and is based off of the Jewish calendar. This day of Pentecost, for Christians, has come to represent and remind us about the Holy Spirit's descent to the 12 disciples. We change our paraments to red and often (if we remember to) wear red ourselves as a visible reminder of this flaming descent.

It is that image portrayed in our scripture today of the flaming tongues atop the Disciples heads that truly made me think it really does only take a spark doesn't it? Pentecost in general refers to the presence of the Holy Spirit being taken in and becoming a part of the Disciples. The visible image is a tongue of flame. However, when I went to search through the Chalice Hymnal for this particular song I realized it was not in the Pentecost section. Those songs are mainly devoted to the Spirit of God who is often described like the wind, not fire.

Music, as you undoubtedly will begin to realize, is a passion of mine. I love how music can often convey things that do not make sense with words alone. I love how music can calm us down, wake us up, make us think, propel us to dance. It shifts and changes and shares a lot about us. We all have favorite songs that speak to us. For me "Pass it On" has always held a special place in my heart. It reminds me of camp, growing up, and a bit of my passion and drive in ministry. It is the inspiration behind my sermon title today. To be honest it was the first thing I thought of when I read this week's scripture about Pentecost.

While the wind-like description is decidedly appropriate flame, fire, and the passing of the torch were what the Spirit of God was pressing me to proclaim today. So into the hymnal I searched and to my surprise "Pass it On" is #477 and I found in an entirely different section entitled Mission and Witness. That threw me, could I honestly now in good conscious utilize the song when it was not perhaps the "best" choice, it wasn't in the Pentecost section after all?

Then as I reflected on this new dilemma in sermon writing I realized it simply comes down to how we use Pentecost in the life of our church.

We are celebrating Pentecost today, a day where we celebrate the Disciples of Christ being filled with the Holy Spirit. In that celebrating we can always use today as the awesome reminder of the powerful presence of God. It is a powerful image and a powerful understanding is it not? The tongues of flame that are on the disciple's heads, the various disciples speaking in different languages being able to be understood by one and all. It is a familiar scripture that many will have read in various languages or by different voices at the same time to give us a feeling of what that must have been like for the disciples. This reminder of the powerful presence of God is important. The flame depicted on top of a person's head also helps us to remember another fire, the fire that is supposed to be lit in our souls for spiritual renewal and awakening re-fueled by today.

It is supposed to be but is it? NO, it is not. We have allowed ourselves to fall into a rut with our faith. We look and we view and we taste but at our cores we really do not like to commit beyond what we already know. I would never state that any reminder of God is not significant. But a reminder can only go so far in our lives. The feel good happy of the moment can only go as far as we take it when we have encountered God's spirit in powerful ways.

For example I have this balloon here. (Fill balloon.) We all know what happens, it doesn't really float or fly it just sits there and in a couple of days it will gradually deflate and really just be a bit of latex without purpose or drive. But add fire to that air that goes into a balloon and what do we get? Now, I couldn't bring in a hot-air balloon and a picture doesn't really convey what I mean. So let me put it to you in another way.

(This is a participatory image of the spirit's movement utilizing the congregation.)

We have recently been involved in Relay for Life. We just had a fund-raising luncheon and many participated in the event. I want to ask any who have personally been affected by cancer to stand whether yourself or a family member. Now I want any who did relay for life a couple weeks ago to stand, now any who have ever done relay for life to stand, and finally I ask any who have prayed for those standing to now stand.

You see we can use Pentecost as a jumping off point for our church's mission and witness. The tongues of flame, the gift of interpretation were not stagnant gifts to be taken in and placed on a shelf marked for display only. They are practical gifts, gifts meant to be used. Yes, it truly does only take a spark to get a fire going. Pentecost Sunday might mark the end of the Easter Season but it also marks the beginning of the Ordinary time. I mention this because we do not have special Sunday's every week of the year. In fact most of the year is taken up by the ordinary. We come to church on Sunday and it is great, we might lead bible studies, be on committees or do our parts for the whole but in the heart of ourselves where is our personal relationship. Where is our fire for the Lord, where is our spark that ignites?

In the Gym at Camp Christian, the church camp in Ohio, where I first learned "Pass it on" is a plaque that reads "take from the alters of the past the fire not the ashes", I can not deny I have always loved this quote, loved its various meanings, and then as I was dwelling and praying about this Sunday I thought what keeps a fire burning, once the spark has been lit, FUEL.

What feeds us? We have our collective worship here at church on Sunday, we might have small groups, bible studies etc. that is all good and well but at the heart of it what do WE as individuals stand on, how is our relationship with God? I am sure many of us remember our baptisms. The feeling in some ways of shock surprise and then the overwhelming realization that we really have no idea of what to do or how to do but suddenly in some way we are different. We are part of the body of believers and that is both a revelation and a responsibility. Yet here it is TODAY and we can never go back to that time of wonderment when we are first baptized although in some ways I think we continually hope that something will bring that spark back.

How do we keep adding fuel to both our own fires as individuals of faith and also the collective church? Where do we see it heading...sometimes it is not up to us either to tend the fire or expect others to provide fuel, we sometimes have to step out of ourselves, trust in the Spirit of the Lord and let the Fire burn. Do we do this through personal bible time, daily prayers, devotionals, maybe just some one on one time, It really doesn't matter how but it does matter perhaps more than we realized how much, an unfed fire can not burn.

You see "Pass it on" has it right it does only take a spark to get the fire going but we might want to remind ourselves on this Pentecost Sunday of the dichotomy of our faith. We are at once both the spark and the fire. We have our own fire, sparked by our love of Jesus Christ and that fire always needs fuel. Yet, we also are called and compelled to take our sparks and pass it on to others through our mission and witness. After all it only takes a spark to get a fire going.