

As A Fire Is Meant for Burning

Saint Marks United Methodist Church, Charleston, WV Pentecost Sunday (May 24) 2015

Acts 2:1-4; Romans 8:22-27

^{2:1} When the day of Pentecost arrived, they were all together in one place. ² And suddenly there came from heaven a sound like a mighty rushing wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. ³ And divided tongues as of fire appeared to them and rested on each one of them. ⁴ And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance.

^{8:22} For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. ²³ And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. ²⁴ For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? ²⁵ But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

²⁶ Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words. ²⁷ And he who searches hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

Today begins the longest liturgical season in the Church year: the season of Pentecost. Last Sunday, we ended the Easter season with the Ascension of Jesus. During the Easter Season, our worship and sermon theme was ***“the images of Christ.”*** We had many pictures, which are still up here today, as a segue from Easter to Pentecost.

Do you notice what is the NEWEST ADDITION TO THINGS FRAMED that was not here during the last few weeks?

YES! We have added mirrors.

The image of Christ presented after the Ascension of Christ – is found in the Church, whose birth was on the Day of Pentecost. The Church is, thus, called the BODY OF CHRIST.

Where do you see the Image of Christ? In the mirror.

You were made in the image of God. Jesus came to show us what that looks like.

No more: ***“Oh, I’m only human.”*** No, by the power of the Spirit, we were told we could, and are directed, by Jesus to do even greater works than did He.

Last Sunday, when Pierson Cook was baptized, his parents made a vow (Hymnal page 34, paragraph 4.2) that they would **accept the freedom AND POWER that God gives us to resist evil, injustice, and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves.**

Not gird up their loins and do it on their own. Nope! Accept the POWER of the Holy Spirit to do it.

The Hymn we sang earlier (vs. 1 for the Introit) and which we’ll sing later for the response to the benediction (verse 3) carries the same title as the sermon: ***As A Fire Is Meant for Burning.***

Fire is the one of the symbols of Pentecost. We have one burning on the Altar Table today.

That hymn says that **as the fire is meant for burning, so, too, the church is meant for mission, giving glory to God’s name.**

The next line, I’d like for us to focus upon:

Not to preach our creeds or customs, but to build a bridge of care, we join hands across the nations, finding neighbors everywhere.

The first Pentecost was about that – reaching out across the language barriers of boundaries, drawing people together. **THIS** is the role of Christ’s Church, reversing the movement at the Tower of Babel, back in Genesis, chapter 11.

All creation has been waiting and longing for this healing, says Romans chapter 8.

Indeed the last chapter of the last book of the Bible describes that **“healing of the nations”** is the final purpose of God, which **WILL be accomplished**.

When we look into the looking glass, we see the God in which we were created. We are made in the image of God; Jesus looks back at us.

When the Fire of Pentecost came, we were invited – yea, even commanded – to *step through the looking glass*, and to reach out for healing – the healing of individuals and the healing of nations.

One of the things that concerns me – and others, too! – is that it seems that RELIGION is causing more division in the world, in the nation, in the neighborhood, than it is causing healing.

Church folks – of perhaps all the religions – seem more bent on “being right” – than on healing.

Again, the words we sang earlier:

Not to preach our creeds or customs, but to build a bridge of care, we join hands across the nations, finding neighbors everywhere.

I learned a very valuable lesson early in my ministry about this, when I was ministering to a man who was dying. Although we had not known each other a few decades before, it was very clear that he and I would have been on opposite sides of the political and theological fence of the day. Had we known each other, we most likely would *not have liked each other*. And the differences we held were **very important** to each of us, about issues that seemed to be of extremely important nature.

But, in this later time, when we did know one another, as important as those issues HAD been, now they didn't matter much at all. He was dying, and I was helping prepare him for that passage. Priorities were rearranged.

An author I recently read put it something like this: *the things about which we care so much in our younger years – material things and even ideas – all tend to fade in importance as the years go by. We tend to focus in our latter years on the stuff that is really important; what draws us together, not what pulls us apart.*

And yet, we continue to go on and on, focusing on what divides us instead of what draws us together.

That's not God's Way. God wants – as Jesus put it – to draw us all together as a mother hen draws her chicks beneath her wings. (Matthew 22:37) The final chapter is all about the healing of the nations. (Revelation 22)

The Spirit helps us in our weakness, and intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words.

All creation has been groaning for this. And this IS what God will accomplish!

When the Fire of Pentecost still comes today, we are invited – yea, even commanded – to *step through the looking glass*, and to reach out for healing – the healing of individuals and the healing of nations.

My friend the Rev'd Tom Nolan tells a story that helps me to understand what this is all about.

In New York City, there was an old alcoholic, homeless man, who lived under the bridge. His name was Joe. One night at the mission, where he went for

food and compassion, he heard, as if for the first time, the words of the Pentecostal song:

Breathe on me Breath of God; fill me with life anew. That I may love what thou dost love, and do what thou wouldst do.

Well, that hymn stuck with him, as if on the day of Pentecost itself. And old Joe's life was changed. He continued to go the mission everyday, but now it was to give to others. No task was beneath him, be it cleaning bathrooms or kitchen floors, or cleaning up after those who got sick in the mission. But, most of all, he loved people – people who were hurting, people to whom love had been a stranger. And so many of them loved old Joe right back.

One night the director of the mission was preaching, as usual, and some man came out of the congregation, up to the altar rail, where he knelt to pray. Tears began to roll down his cheeks, and he began to cry out to God, **“Oh, Lord, make me like Joe.”** Over and over again, the cry went up: **“Oh, Lord, make me like Joe.”** The director went down and knelt beside him and suggested that he might want to change his prayer to, **“Oh, Lord, make me like Jesus.”**

The kneeling man, with a puzzled look on his face, turned his eyes to the preacher's face and asked, **“Is this Jesus like Joe?”**

When we look into the looking glass, we are empowered to see Jesus looking back at us. **But, are we going to accept the mission of Pentecost, to step through the looking glass?**

Will people see us and say, **“Is this Jesus like those people at Saint Marks?”**

As the fire is meant for burning, so, too, the church is meant for mission, giving glory to God's name. Not to preach our creeds or customs, but to build a bridge of care, we join hands across the nations, finding neighbors everywhere.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.