

5-11-2008, Pentecost A  
Chapelwood, Lake Jackson

From Flames to Embers  
1 Corinthians 12:3-13

Today we celebrate the day that the Spirit of God came down on the disciples and formed them into the Church, the gathering of people in which the Spirit of Christ resides. On that day the Holy Spirit set the Church on fire.

Now there's two ways of saying that. You can say, "The Church is...on FIRE." Or you can say, "The CHURCH is on fire!" When you are talking about Pentecost, either way works.

The Church was on fire with the Spirit of God. And from the beginning the Church was in danger of burning down. The first thing the church members did was to run out into the streets shouting at the top of their lungs. Some of the people in the streets understood that they were praising God. Others thought they had lost their minds and that they were roaring drunk at 9 o'clock in the morning.

They were so on fire that they quit their jobs and sold all their possessions and withdrew from the world and wait for Christ to return. They spent all their time either in the Temple worshipping or in one another's homes having Bible studies and prayer meetings and sharing meals.

A few weeks after Pentecost a husband and wife dropped dead in the Fellowship Hall of the Church when they were accused of lying about giving all the proceeds from the sale of their property to the Church.

It wasn't long after that quarrels began breaking out in the Church, as some of the widows complained they were being discriminated against when the food was being distributed.

The early days of the Church were glorious days, when the Church was on fire with the Spirit of God. But the Church was always close to burning down.

That pattern continued throughout the New Testament. It's not an accident that the most spiritual of the churches was also the most controversial church. The Church at Corinth was on fire with the Spirit of God. The gifts of the Spirit were being manifested in wonderful, miraculous and amazing ways. People's lives were being transformed.

And it was the most contentious church in the New Testament. We have two letters in the Bible Paul wrote to the Corinthians, trying to get them in line. He wrote at least two others that didn't make it into the Bible. The beautiful love chapter, 1 Corinthians 13, was written because the Corinthians were being so unloving to one another.

When the Spirit sets a church on fire, it seems that the church is often in danger of burning down.

So, what's the alternative? Should we say, "Thanks, but not thanks. Don't set us on fire. We may be dead and cold, but at least we do things decently and in order?"

No. There is a third choice. The church needs to think of itself as a barbecue pit.

Guys, you know that one of the best things about grilling outdoors is starting the fire. You load the wood or charcoal and pour the fire starter over it. You know a little bit will do, but you put more on than you need to. Then you light the match and lean back

and throw it in. Then you watch in wonder and amazement, as a great explosion of flames shoots up into the air. It's beautiful. It's exciting. It's thrilling.

But you soon learn that those flames are not much good for cooking the food. If you throw the meat on the grill while those flames are still shooting up, you will have food that's burnt to a crisp on the outside and raw on the inside.

Some churches do that to their members. They are so on fire with the Spirit that the members are glowing on the outside, but when you go just beneath the surface, you find that they are raw with spiritual immaturity.

No, to cook the food properly and to enable the Spirit of God to truly transform people, you have to let the flames burn down to embers. Embers aren't spectacular. They aren't exciting. But embers do a far better job of producing a product which is healthy and satisfying to the body and to the soul.

We need to let the flames burn down to embers, both as a church and as members of the church.

I recall when the Spirit of God came down on me and set me on fire. It was a glorious time. God was so real that I could almost reach out and touch the face of God. I knew the mind and the will of God. Christ became my constant companion and friend. It was wonderful! It was glorious!

And I was a pain. I became so self-righteous and judgmental that I burned up everyone around me. I criticized the church for being so lukewarm and spiritually dead. Why weren't they on fire for the Lord, like I was? Why couldn't they be like me? Why wouldn't they listen to me when I told them the Truth, which had eluded them all their lives? Yes, I was on fire for the Lord, but I was not a loving person. I was crispy on the outside and raw with immaturity on the inside. I had to let the flames of the Spirit burn down to embers.

How do you do that? Paul tells us how.

First, he says, remember that no one can say that "Jesus is the Lord" unless they are moved by the Spirit. People come to church because Jesus is their Lord. We learn that we are not the only ones moved by the Spirit.

Being set on fire by the Spirit is a lot like falling madly and passionately in love. When it happens to you, it is so wonderful that you think, "Surely no one else has ever experienced anything this glorious. If they did, that's all they would be talking about." But the truth is that most people have, at some point in their lives, fallen madly and passionately in love. They married the person they fell in love with, and their love burned down to embers. There may not as many sparks and flames as there were in the beginning, but their love grows stronger and more powerful with each passing year.

I had a counseling professor who used to say that falling in love is a form of temporary insanity. I agree. It's wonderful. But you can't build a strong, lasting relationship on that high degree of emotion.

The same is true of our spiritual lives. At some time, just about everyone who is a faithful and committed member of the church was set on fire by the Holy Spirit. But we cannot sustain that high level of emotion. The people around you on Sunday morning are people who are moved by the Spirit of God. They were once on fire for the Lord. They still are. But they have let that fire burn down to embers.

In order to burn down to embers you have to recognize you're not the only one being moved by the Spirit of God.

Paul tells us that we have to recognize that the Spirit does not come to us to lift us above all others. The Spirit comes to us to inspire us to lift others. Sadly, some people are attracted to spirituality because it gives them a sense of superiority. Because they are so spiritual, they live on a higher plane than ordinary people. They use the Spirit to lift themselves up. But we burn down to embers when we recognize that the power we receive from the Spirit is given to us so that we can be more effective in serving others. The spiritual gifts we receive are not intended to mark us as God's special people. They are simply tools to be used in the service of the church and the world.

And Paul tells us that we burn down to embers when we recognize that there are no Lone Rangers in the spiritual world. I loved the Lone Ranger when I was a kid. The stories were always the same. The bad guys would come into an old west community and harass the ordinary people, who were always helpless to stop them. The Lone Ranger would ride into town and banish the bad guys and return law and order to the community. Then he would ride out into the sunset. Someone would ask, "Who was that stranger?" And someone else would say, "That was the Lone Ranger." There is a part of us that would like to be the Lone Ranger in the church, the hero, the one person with the power to vanquish evil and bring good into the church and the world. But that's not the way it works. It takes the whole body of Christ to do that. Each of us has our gifts. None of those is sufficient to itself. We need others to minister to us, while we minister to them. And together we minister to the world in the name of Christ. There are no Lone Rangers in the body of Christ.

If we learn those lessons, we are well on our way to burning down to embers.

Now, there is a danger in letting the flames of the Spirit burn down to embers. That is the fire can burn out completely. How do we avoid that? The same way you keep the embers burning on the fireplace—keep blowing on them. The Spirit will keep the embers burning if we just let the Spirit keep blowing on us.

Sometimes the Spirit will blow a little harder and the flames will shoot up. And we will say, "Uh-oh. Here we go again." People will be on fire for the Lord, saying and doing crazy things. There will be chaos and confusion. That's okay. It's kind of like having a new baby in the house. They're noisy and messy and a lot of trouble, but it's worth it. It's new life. It's exciting. They are our future.

So, our prayer this morning is, "Come, Holy Spirit, come. Set us on fire. You cause us a lot of trouble when you do, but it's worth it."

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