

Pentecost – May 19, 2024
Text: Antiphon to the Introit
Theme: Filled and Kindled Hearts

The Introit appointed for Pentecost is from Ps. 104 and the first verse is an ancient liturgical text. It says,

Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of the faithful, and kindle in them the fire of your love. Alleluia.

O Lord, how manifold are your works! In wisdom have you made them all; the earth is full of your creatures.

These all look to you, to give them their food in due season.

When you give it to them, they gather it up; when you open your hand, they are filled with good things.

When you send forth your Spirit, they are created, and you renew the face of the ground.

The liturgical verse that is the antiphon is a verse that has been appointed to be spoken in the Church on the day of Pentecost for hundreds of years.

“Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of the faithful and kindle in them the fire of your love. Alleluia!” This simple little verse was a prayer of the early Church – a prayer that the miracle that had happened on Pentecost would reoccur every single day in the hearts of the faithful. And still today, we continue to pray that the Holy Spirit would continue to fill our hearts with his love and kindle a fire that is white-hot to warm our world and dazzling-bright to burn through the darkness that is all around us.

The people of God need to be filled and kindled by the Spirit. I say that because, in general, many Christians are lukewarm with regard to their faith and often so dimly lit that others hardly notice that they are there. All around us there are people searching for a way to be on fire for something, to have their empty hearts filled with something. And we know where the coals are hot and the firewood is all stacked! But we are too often Christians of convenience.

Too many Christians drag themselves to church only when they have nothing better to do or when they feel too guilty to miss again. They might begrudgingly show up for a few non-worship events here and there so family will stay off their backs. And they throw 20 bucks in the plate when they're in church. And that's about it. They're saved by the blood of Jesus, but they're lukewarm, dimly lit children of God. So how do we become the filled and kindled children of God that God so wants us to be?

Once, on a High School youth retreat, some of the participants tried to get a fire going in the firepit with limited success. The wood they had was too big and there was too much of it. They used so much paper that it was smothering itself and there was no space between the logs. They gave up and moved on to basketball. I fixed the fire and they were amazed at the roaring fire when they

returned. "How did you do that?" they asked. "I'm a pastor," I said. "You know, pillar of fire, burning bush etcetera, etcetera." But the truth is, as you Boy Scouts know, there are only a few right ways to build a fire and many, many wrong ways. Likewise, there are only a few of right ways to become filled and kindled with the Holy Spirit, and many, many wrong ways.

So how does one become filled and kindled? The inward look is always a popular method, but it doesn't work. People forever examine themselves – developing purpose-driven programs and orchestrating events to try and heat up their fire – trying to fan those coals into flame, and it may seem to help for a while. But if all you have is hot coals, you can fan them all day and they will glow a little brighter but a real, roaring fire requires fuel.

Maybe you, like me, have been to church services where you leave feeling like you intimately know the plight of the poor and homeless in Chicago, but if you hadn't known Jesus going in, you sure wouldn't know him coming out. When the issue or cause takes the place of the Gospel, we're just fanning coals and the problem is there's no fuel inside you or me or anyone else. All the fuel is outside of us. There is no cause that fills our hearts and sets them on fire like the Gospel. First, our hearts must be filled and kindled and THEN, then they will become a consuming, insatiable fire.

Some folks are drawn to preachers who tell them just what they want to hear. That preacher will say that they are burning brightly with all their social programs and fellowship opportunities and trips to the amusement park for the youth group. They should be really happy with their beautiful worship facility and their praise band and their operating budget that is clearly in the black! Well, I guess if you can't be a roaring fire, being a smoldering wick is better than nothing, but to me, that's sort of like wearing a tuxedo to McDonald's. You can dress up however you like, but a Big Mac is still going to be a Big Mac.

Preachers have built some pretty huge glass houses for themselves with their pretty words, and as long as you cast nothing but feathers from the pulpit – you're relatively safe from breakage. But the Holy Spirit doesn't throw feathers. Take a look sometime at the sermon Peter preached in Acts on that day of Pentecost. It was not feathery. It shattered a great many glass houses for pious religious people who wanted to live however it was most convenient for them and still call themselves children of God.

That sermon that Peter preached cut them to the heart and they were not feeling very good about themselves. Well, they shouldn't have felt good about themselves. They had killed Jesus and set a murderer free. But remember, we have done likewise.

Every time we have chosen to sin, we have pounded nails into His flesh. Jesus gave everything for us, even his soul, and when we choose to be lukewarm and dimly lit, we are wearing a tux, sitting in McDonalds, eating a Big Mac, and loudly proclaiming that it is filet mignon. There we sit in a molded plastic chair in a fast-food restaurant when Jesus has bought for us admission to paradise. Why do we do that?

People didn't walk away from Pentecost necessarily feeling really good about themselves. But they were empowered. And I hope that none of us feel really good about the way we live when we make choices that are inconsistent with God – offering meager support for His Church – having a blasé attitude toward worship and Bible Study. I hope we don't feel good about that. But I hope we, like the people on the Day of Pentecost, are empowered by being confronted with our sin and our salvation.

I hope the Word of God is getting through to us and stoking the fires of our hearts. I hope we are beginning to see that our Baptisms were not historic events but water that changed our lives forever making us the powerful army of God. I hope we receive the body and blood of Christ today and feel it surge through our souls and burst out of us in flames of love and kindness and giving. This is how we are fed. This is how we are kindled.

There's a reason I come to church every Sunday – even in the summer – even when I'm on vacation. It is not because it's my job. I could get a job doing anything. It is because worship is where I am fed and kindled and there was a time in my life folks when it was not so. There was a time in my life when worship and Bible study and reception of the Sacrament were just something I did because it was expected of me and I did it enough to keep people off my back. And I could feel myself getting lost, but I didn't understand what I was missing, like that time when you were mindlessly walking through the woods or driving in a strange city and suddenly realized that you were completely lost without any idea of where you were.

That's why I proclaim Word and Sacrament over and over and over again. Because when I was lost, that was what saved me. Not gimmicks or guilt or griping parents. What saved me were the powerfully preached Word of God, the body and blood of Jesus Christ surging through me, and Baptismal waters, once forgotten, coming to life again by the power of the Word. And as the smoldering coals of my spirit came to life and began to burn again, I began to help people because I wanted to help them, not to earn merit or to avoid guilt. I started to crave God – needing more of God and more of God. I started becoming a consuming fire for God burning up the

chaff in my path and refining the gold. That is what the Lord desires for every one of His children.

God promises to do this work through His Word and His Sacraments. The question is; do you want your lives changed forever? Do you want to have even greater faith that is not distracted by earthly nonsense? Do you want to become free of guilt and shame and low self-esteem?

On Pentecost, the Holy Spirit burst into this world like a roaring, fiery wind and filled the hearts of the faithful and kindled within them a faith of monumental proportion. And so, he comes to us today, not by social works, not by feathery self-indulgent words, but through the sometimes painful, always powerful Word of God and through the waters of Baptism and through the Lord's Supper. He is stoking a fire in this place and I guarantee you - He is doing amazing things through us. What an honor to be such a conduit for our God.