

Friendly Fire
Acts 2:1-21
June 4, 2006

The Gospel began in friendship, one loving heart setting another on fire. St. Augustine

FIRE! The shout arouses anxiety, for we have been programmed to hear the word as an alert to danger. We clear the building, pull out the fire extinguishers, and call for help. It is not an alarm to be taken lightly, for it signals potential danger and destruction. It calls for prompt and swift action.

Despite our programming from Smokey the Bear, fire is not always an enemy. For over a century, firefighters have battled wildfires in the forest with everything they've got. But their efforts haven't paid off in ways we expected. In fact our efforts to control wildfires have actually made the forest fire situation far worse, say many experts.

The forest has not always had an adversarial relationship with fire. For a long time, fire was really quite friendly. Before humans intervened, scattered ground fires, naturally ignited by lightning, cleared forest floors of accumulating leaves, branches and needles every five to 25 years. These ecologically friendly fires swiftly swept across the forest floor, leaving large trees intact with room to grow.

For 100 years we've interrupted an organic cycle we didn't even know existed and are only now beginning to understand. Scientists suspect certain plants have evolved by using naturally occurring burns to their advantage. Through our firefighting we may have inadvertently impeded the propagation, natural balance, and growth of wild vegetation.

Old farmers know that some burning is good for the plant and good for the soil. Friendly fires create natural fertilizer, strengthen root systems, and remove debris that thwarts vigorous growth. Some burning, some adversity, might be good for us, too. It is healthy to periodically burn away the weeds choking our virtues; it is cleansing to torch the harmful peccadilloes in the undergrowth of our hearts. We need some spiritual fertilizer with nutrients, strengthening of our roots, and removal of debris that foils our growth.

What we need is the friendly fire of the Holy Spirit, which came on Pentecost and remains alive and active today. The Holy Spirit came as flames like tongues of fire alighting on men and women, illuminating their minds with the first great gift of speaking languages they did not know.

The friendly fire of the Holy Spirit can burn away the undergrowth and debris of our lives, and allow new life to appear. The friendly fire of the

Spirit can renew our souls, enliven our hope, and make our worship experiences more powerful, if only we allow this cleansing fire of God to burn within us. The Holy Spirit is essential to vital Christian faith, just as our lands and forests need an occasional friendly fire.

Deprived of fire, wooded landscapes from New York's Adirondacks to Washington's Olympic Peninsula have undergone dramatic changes: Once-grassy clearings are closed up with trees. Swamps are filled in with vegetation and have dried up. The open area under the tree canopy, known as the understory, is clogged with a mass of vegetation.

Our souls, too, may feel closed up, dried up and clogged. We need the purifying, cleansing fire of the Holy Spirit to purge that which blocks our connection to God and allow God's Holy Presence to grow within.¹

Throughout the scriptures God often appears as flames of fire. An angel of the Lord appeared to Moses in a flaming bush that was blazing, but not consumed. Moses was going about his usual business as a shepherd when suddenly God broke into his life and called him to a new mission (Ex. 3:2). Later as Moses led the Israelites out of Egypt and through the wilderness to freedom, God guided them through a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night (Ex. 13:21). When Moses went to Mt. Sinai to meet God for the revealing of the law, the Lord descended to meet him as fire, wrapping the mountain in mysterious smoke (Ex. 19:18). The Lord came in a chariot of fire drawn by horses of fire to carry the prophet Elijah into heaven (2 Kings 2:11). The prophet Jeremiah describes God's word as fire (Jeremiah 23:29). The book of Hebrews says that fire is God's servant (Heb. 1:7) and that "Our God is a consuming fire" (Hebrews 12:29). Fire is a powerful symbol of divine presence and action on earth.

John the Baptist promises the disciples that while he baptizes with water, Jesus will baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire (Luke 3:16). Jesus promises the disciples that after he has returned to his Father, they will be "clothed with power from on high" (Luke 24:49). On the day of Pentecost the promised Holy Spirit arrives, making a dramatic entrance to the sound of a stirring wind and flaming tongues of fire. The fiery presence of God creates a miracle. As the disciples are filled with the Holy Spirit, they are given the ability to speak in other languages. The pilgrims who have come from far away to celebrate the Jewish feast of Pentecost in Jerusalem hear the disciples speaking to them in their own native tongues. They are astonished to hear the good news of Jesus Christ shared in languages each can understand. The end result of this powerful manifestation of God's presence is that 3,000 persons are converted to the Christian faith. What a marvelous beginning to the mission of Jesus'

disciples! They will soon find out, however, that every day will not bring such rich rewards!

God intervenes in human lives, often as friendly fire, purging us of sin and inspiring us with passion. The glowing divine fire is meant to enhance and empower our lives.

Alan Jones, Dean of Grace Cathedral, suggests that there are “two different kinds of burnings, two kinds of fire: the fire of God’s love and the fire of human pride. Yet it is all one fire. The flame has two effects: one of radiance, the other of radiation. There is the promise of radiance in our transfiguration into the likeness of God. Radiance shines in us insofar as we are willing to be transformed into experiments in vulnerability. There is also the threat of our destruction by the searing radiation from a nuclear holocaust...Our destiny is to be burned by one fire or another and so be either transfigured or consumed. Our pilgrimage is the drama of this choice.”²

Two kinds of fire: the fire of God’s love and the fire of human pride. One leads to radiance, the other to radiation. One leads to life and growth; the other to destruction. There are two loves vying for our attention: God’s love and a crippling self-love that is insatiable. This is not a healthy self-love, but that of a devouring emptiness that is cut off from the source of life.

If we fail to submit ourselves to the life-giving flames of God, we will find ourselves burned out. Alone we cannot sustain the joy, the strength, the hope, the fuel that we need for a fulfilling life. When we are only self-dependent, eventually our energy fades and the glow of life dies.

Enthusiasm grows faint, stagnation sets in, leading to frustration and finally apathy. We simply don’t care any more – about ourselves, about anyone else, about our livelihood, about life. Our fires need to be stoked by a source beyond ourselves. We need to be refueled by a power greater than ourselves. We need the friendly fire of the Holy Spirit to rekindle the fire within, to stoke the flames that empower us, and to provide light to guide us.

How do we keep the love of God aflame within us? How do we stoke the fires of our enthusiasm and passion for spiritual growth? Van Gogh once wrote to his friend, “...one must never let the fire go out in one’s soul but keep it burning.”³

Spiritual Director Joyce Rupp suggests that “We must stay close to the original flame of love, and draw near to the heart of God through daily prayer and a continual yearning to be one with the divine presence. Each time we intentionally draw near to God we light a candle in our heart.

“Sometimes our prayer and our desire are not enough to keep the passion for God alive in us. At these times we need to draw close to others

whose hearts are on fire with God. Simply by being with them we can often catch a spark that will renew our own lost radiance. Goodness attracts goodness. Fire leaps from heart to heart.”⁴

Just as wood takes time to reach a kindling point before it bursts into flame, so the process of rekindling our hearts with enthusiasm and joy takes time, patience, and trust. “We cannot force the flame before its time. We can only do our part and entrust the kindling to our God and the people God brings into our lives. We do know that a spark of God lies within each of us. The more this spark grows the more it will influence our vision of life and our participation in the human family. We will be more alive to joy and sorrow. We will have a passion for life that radiates into the lives of others. We will accept people as they are and become more compassionate. As the fire of God dances in us we will become ever more generous with our forgiveness and more daring in our action for a justice that will heal our world.”⁵

It need not be a major event or revelation that ignites our enthusiasm. God is often known in the simplest of things. “White men,” said the Native Americans, “build big fires and then sit away back, forced back by the heat. Indians, though, build small, inviting fires and sit up close.”⁶ As we often sing, “It only takes a spark to get a fire going, and soon all those around will warm up in its glowing. That’s how it is with God’s love, once we’ve experienced it. You want to sing, it’s fresh like spring, and you want to pass it on.”

On this Pentecost Sunday we remember the friendly fire of God’s Holy Spirit, a fire that is sometime painful as it purges our souls of that which is not of God. It is a fire that expresses the passionate love of God for us, a love that desires to transfigure us with radiance, a love that sparks enthusiasm, energy, and joy for living. May the friendly fire of God’s Holy Spirit rekindle your spirit.

¹ *Homiletics*, June 2003, pp. 47-49.

² Alan Jones, *Passion for Pilgrimage: Notes for the Journey Home* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989), p. 176-177.

³ Ruskil, Mark, ed. *The Letters of Vincent van Gogh* (New York: Atheneum, Macmillan Publishing Co., 1963), p. 110.
Quoted by Joyce Rupp, *May I Have This Dance?* (Notre Dame, Indiana: Ave Maria Press, 1992), p. 111.

⁴ Joyce Rupp, *May I Have This Dance?* p. 111.

⁵ *Ibid*, p. 112.

⁶ *Homiletics Online*, retrieved June 1, 2006.

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