

San Lorenzo Community Church, United Church of Christ

Sermon: Be the Match

By Rev. Annette J. Cook

Sunday, June 4, 2017

A reading from the Book of Acts 2:1 -21.

² 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 their own language being spoken. ⁷ Utterly amazed, they asked: "Aren't all these who are speaking Galileans?" ⁸ Then how is it that each of us hears them in our native language?

⁹ The languages from Michigan, Illinois, Indiana, Ohio, Iowa and across the Midwest. From Puerto Rico, Florida, North and South Carolina, Massachusetts, New York and the whole Eastern seaboard. From Oklahoma, Utah, Colorado, Texas, Arizona, New Mexico, and Hawaii. People from Modesto, Manteca, Oakland, Alameda, Hayward, Castro Valley, across Northern and Southern California ¹¹ (both Jews and converts to Judaism); and people from San Leandro and here in San Lorenzo, 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 people 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 heavens 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.

This ends the reading from the Book of Acts. Thanks be to God.

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I have had a recurring dream that, over the years, has become as much of a daydream as a night-time dream. I am standing outdoors, on a knoll or ridge – not high like the mountains, but lower like a hill or the berm behind my house. I am facing West toward the afternoon sun.

There is water from a lake or a river on one side of me. I am dressed against a slight chill in the air – with my fleece vest and long-sleeve shirt. My arms are outstretched, my palms are open and fingers extending beyond. And all around me is the wind. Coming toward me, washing over me, swirling around me and going through me.

And in the midst of it all, I am standing, leaning into the energy, feeling the coolness, the lightness, the spontaneity. I am not losing my balance and in fact I am receiving an equilibrium of spirit and soul, of doing and being, of feeling and thinking, a balance in my life. All in the face of the rushing wind.

I close my eyes to relish in the moment. To accept the wind, to accept the power, to accept the generosity of Spirit around me.

It is, in that moment, as if God has washed away all that would hold me back, keep me down, close me off from my soul and from the soul of humanity. It is, in that moment, as if God has forgiven all of my past and is energizing my future. I am loved and I am free. It is a communion with the wind. It has ignited a fire in my soul. And as the moment is over, I realize that I have been given a new life – a new purpose – a new meaning.

Let us pray: O Holy and Everlasting Breath of God, Breath of Peace, fill us this day with your energy and power; send your Spirit coursing through our veins; shine your light upon us that it might enlighten our way. Amen.

The poet William Blake wrote a poem about Pentecost. Part of the poem says:

Unless the eye catch fire, God will not be seen.
Unless the ear catch fire, God will not be heard.
Unless the tongue catch fire, God will not be named.
Unless the Heart catch fire, God will not be loved.
Unless the mind catch fire, God will not be known.

Have you ever had one of those moments when you're driving in the car and listening to the radio--maybe it's an in-depth news story on NPR or some similar station--and you become so engrossed in the story that even though you have arrived at your destination, you can't leave the car until you've heard the whole story?

I've heard some people call these "driveway" moments--stories that are so compelling and personally moving that they touch mind and heart in compelling, life transforming ways. Some people are brought to tears by these moments and others begin to look at their lives in new and unexpected ways.

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I had a "driveway" moment a few months ago when I was listening to a NPR's show "On Being" with Krista Tippett. It is an interview-style show, rather like Charlie Rose's PBS show, that asks the question: "What does it mean to be human? And How do we want to live?"

Krista was interviewing former chef, secular intellectual, skeptic, and journalist Sara Miles, about her unexpected--and inconvenient--conversion to Christianity when she entered a church on impulse in San Francisco one Sunday.

You see, Miles was raised as an atheist and she was happily living an "enthusiastically secular life" as a restaurant cook and journalist, indifferent to religion at best. As she says in the Prologue to her book, *Take This Bread*, "I was certainly not interested in becoming a Christian.... Or, as I thought of it rather less politely, a religious nut." Cheryl had previously loaned the book to me, but I still hadn't read it. But this interview grabbed my attention.

As Sara entered the doors of St. Gregory of Nyssa Episcopal Church in San Francisco on a whim, she ate a piece of bread and took a sip of wine and found herself *radically transformed*.... At the age of 46 this was her first communion and it changed *everything*.

Pentecost is an encounter of wonderful and unexpected things that completely re-orient our way of being. Sara Miles had no intention of becoming a follower of Jesus, until she met him, as a living reality, in the bread and wine of the Eucharist.

From that moment, she started a food pantry and gave away literally tons of fruit and vegetables and cereal around the same altar where she first received communion. She then organized new pantries all over the city to provide hundreds of hungry families with free groceries each week. Without committees or meetings or even an official telephone number, she recruited scores of volunteers and raised hundreds of thousands of dollars.

Unpredictable, uncontrollable wind, fire, and breath, radically transforms our lives. When the spirit is active and present, it's not just about, "me," but about, "we." It's about the creation of a new kind of inclusive, welcoming, *community* based on love.

And, like many of us, Sara Miles also discovered that her newly transformed life wasn't necessarily going to be easy. She had to trudge in the rain through housing projects, sit on the curb wiping the runny nose of a psychotic man, take the firing pin out of a battered woman's .357 Magnum, then stick the gun in a cookie tin in the trunk of her car. She had to learn about the great American scandal of the politics of food, the economy of hunger, and the rules of money.

This movement of wind and flame of Pentecost, well, it brings change! Some of it welcome, some not, but always directed to the neighbor in need.

Christianity is **not** about things we should or shouldn't do, nor is it about just being nice. It's about reveling in the beauty of creation, about taking part in the wonderment of it all by living, loving, and being. It's about embracing the pain and suffering of the world and transforming it into new life. It's about harnessing the creative Spirit of flame and wind that is so much a part of what it means to be human.

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Erasmus, a famous Renaissance scholar, once told the story where Jesus returns to heaven after his time on earth. The angels gather around him to learn what all happened during his days on earth. Jesus tells them of the miracles, his teachings, his death on the cross, and His resurrection. When he finishes his story, Michael the Archangel asks Jesus, "But what happens now?"

Jesus answers, "I have left behind eleven faithful disciples and a handful of men and women who have faithfully followed me. They will declare my message and express my love. These faithful people will build my church."

"But," responds Michael, "What if these people fail? What then is your other plan?"

And Jesus answers, "I have no other plan!"

Or it's like the eight year old asks "Can you tell me if there is an easy way to start a fire by using just two pieces of wood?"

The troop leader answers: "It is easy to start a fire with two pieces of wood if one of those pieces of wood is a match."

You are at a meeting and you keep thinking, "Why don't 'they' get down to work and do something? Where's the fire in this group?" Or, you could try to be the match.

You are at home, thinking wistfully of your mate, "If only he - or she - were more loving or would only do the dishes as I asked or would finally pay attention to me, then our marriage would really catch fire." Or, you could try to be the match.

At work, you wish the boss would exert more leadership, that your co-workers would put more muscle into their efforts. Or, you could try to be the match.

In our community, if only the leaders were more concerned, the citizens more committed, the neighbors more neighborly. Or, you could try to be the match.

You are sitting in church thinking that your pastor hasn't yet done your great idea you shared a while back. If only she could get it together and start a fire in the congregation! Or, you could try to be the match.

The Holy Spirit is moving among us with wind and with fire. The Holy Spirit makes unpredictable and unexpected transformations all around us. Repeat after me:

- barriers are broken,
- communities are formed,
- opposites are reconciled,
- unity is established,
- addiction is broken,
- cities are renewed,
- races are reconciled,

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- hope is established,
- people are blessed,
- and church happens.

You see, today the Spirit of God is present and we're not just going to go to church, we are going to BE the church. Because we can be the match. Amen.