

## *Fire in the Body*

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Acts 2:1-4; 1 Corinthians 12:4-13  
Lewinsville Presbyterian Church  
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What do you get when you put Acts 2 - with the tongues of fire being poured out on the disciples gathered together at Pentecost – together with 1 Corinthians 12 – with its foundational metaphor of the church as the Body of Christ? What do you get when you put Acts 2 together with 1 Corinthians 12? You get *fire in the body*.

Throughout the Bible, fire is one of the images that is used regularly for God. Fire can warm you when you have grown frozen and cold; fire can purify a metal that has accumulated rust or other impurities; fire can dazzle and mesmerize you with its beauty and shifting shape; and fire has destructive capacity that can burn structures to the ground. Fire has enormous energy.

Deuteronomy 4:24 says, quite directly, that “the Lord your God is a *devouring fire*.” 1 Corinthians 3 describes the purifying experience of salvation as “being saved, as through fire.” And of course, Exodus 3 gives us the paradigmatic encounter of Moses with God at the burning bush, where Moses hears God speaking from a bush that was ablaze with fire, though it was not consumed.

We may imagine all of those meanings and more are at work when the tongues of fire alight on the gathered faith community in Acts 2. *The church is meant to be on fire*. Burning with energy and joy and radiance and passion and a thirst for righteousness and justice and a grief over the sorrows of the world. The church is meant to be on fire, burning with the life of God that burns and purifies and energizes, but does not consume us.

This can be somewhat unsettling talk for us Presbyterians, who have sometimes gone by the nickname of the “Frozen Chosen.” We’re called that, in part because our worship services have not always been the loudest or most exuberant of the various Christian denominations. A teacher of mine once joked that when you hear a Presbyterian go, “Hmmm,” in a worship service, that was the rough equivalent of a Baptist shouting, “Amen!”

But we may observe that there are different ways of being quiet, just as there are different ways of being loud. There is a quiet that is driven by fear, and there is a quiet that is animated by love. There can be a kind of quiet that is driven by fear and anxiety and control, where we can become stiff, where we worry about doing something that might embarrass ourselves, or where we are anxiously trying to keep things under control, so that we end up stifling ourselves and others. But there is

another kind of quiet that lives with the warm energy of reverence. This is the kind of quiet that we may experience during our silent prayers of confession, or during a moving piece of music, or on a silent retreat, or when you are with someone that you know so well that you don't need to say a thing.

In the same way, there are different kinds of loudness. Just as there can be a kind of quiet that is driven by anxiety, there is a loudness that is fueled by anxious control, where we are basically trying to whip everyone into a frenzy, where we try to generate emotion, and in the process drawing attention to ourselves rather than giving glory to God. But there is also a kind of energy that can be quite exuberant and loud, filled with the Spirit's energy in such a way that our bodies and our voices cannot help but move and wave and sing. That kind of energy needs to flow.

Being on fire is not about being loud or being quiet. It is about being filled with the Holy Spirit, and with the love of God.

Now, we must remember that in Christian spirituality, there is absolutely no room for being judgmental. The two temptations we described – anxious, controlling quiet and anxious, controlling loudness – can be *very easy* to fall into, so we should not be judgmental or beat up on ourselves or others when we fall into these. As my teacher Marcella Kraybill Greggo says, "Be at ease." We're all on a journey.

What we are seeking here, and what the day of Pentecost is about, is to allow the energy of God's love to move through us, warming us up, and setting us on fire. The fire we are talking about is the fire of the love for God and the fire of love for others. We experience this fire between lovers, between good friends, between long-time friends, like the love between the participants in the Second Saturday Set, a love that always overflows beyond the group, out into the life of the community and the life of the world. We experience it in the work this congregation is doing with refugees, in welcoming outcasts and strangers, we see it in our support of Chesterbrook and Lewinsville Retirement Residences.

When the body of Christ is on fire, it is never for the sake of the body alone. God does not give the church the Holy Spirit so that we can have a good time. We may end up having a good time, I would hope that we have a good time as the church, but having a good time is not the goal. God is on a mission to heal, redeem, save, judge, and reconcile the world, and the church is one of the instruments that God uses to accomplish those purposes. God gives the church the Holy Spirit, God sets the church on fire, because the healing of the world is far too large a task for the church to accomplish on its own. The church cannot pursue that task under our own wind power. We are not strong enough, we are not patient enough, we are not merciful enough, we are not imaginative enough ON OUR OWN to do this work.

Jesus said as much in John 15, where he says, "Unless you abide in me, you can do nothing." We can't accomplish anything like the redemptive purposes of God if we try to do it on our own. In 1 Corinthians 13, the apostle Paul says, "If I have all knowledge, if I am brilliant and smart and have all the degrees in the world, but if my heart does not burn with the love of God, then all of my brilliance is worth bupkus."

God wants to set the heart of the church on fire, because God wants the church to be energized to share the news of God's love and God's power with the world. In Acts 2, we are told that when the disciples started to speak in other languages, they weren't just talking about the weather. The text tells us that they were speaking about "God's deeds of power." God fills the church with the Holy Spirit so that our speech can bear witness to God's loving power.

A last thing that we can observe about the "fire in the body" that you get when you put Acts 2 together with 1 Corinthians 12 is that the fire of the Spirit is given to individuals and it is given to the whole church. Acts 2 tells us that "divided tongues as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them." Each person in the church is given the gift of the Spirit. That means you. In one sense, it doesn't matter if anyone else appears to be receptive to the Holy Spirit. You just need to be concerned about whether you are receptive to the Holy Spirit.

But 1 Corinthians 12 tells us that the Spirit does not give us gifts for our benefit alone. "To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the *common good*." The fire of the Spirit is given to each individual person, but not to create a whole lot of isolated individuals. The fire of the Spirit – all from the same Spirit, from the same source – is given to each, in order to serve the entire community, in order to build up the entire community, in order to strengthen the entire community. The church is not about creating isolated individuals, but neither is the church about creating an amorphous blob of undifferentiated goo. The church is a fellowship of radiant individuals, woven together in a lively tapestry of coherent brilliance.

Friends of Lewinsville Presbyterian Church, as you know, I am going on sabbatical this summer, beginning this Thursday. Again, I want to express my profound appreciation to you for this gift of a time of rest and renewal. I am going to miss you over the coming 12 weeks. You are now, and you are always becoming, a fellowship of radiant individuals, woven together by Jesus Christ into a lively tapestry of coherent brilliance. I pray that this summer may be a time of rest and renewal for you, even as it is for me, and that you may receive the gift of the Holy Spirit on a daily basis. Allow your hearts to be set on fire, to burn with the warm energy of God's merciful compassion and justice. To God and to God alone be all the glory, Amen.