

Where is the Fire?

Acts 2

The First United Presbyterian Church of Crafton Heights

May 27, 2007 (Pentecost, Open Door 20th anniversary)

Pastor Dave Carver

The town square was filled with chaos. Hoses were stretched everywhere, lights were flashing, a few people were weeping. The old church building was ablaze. People were lining up, helping where they could, watching where they could not. The pastor of the congregation smiled weakly and said to one of the elders, "You know, I can't remember the last time there were so many people at church."

The elder responded quickly, "Well, Reverend, I can't remember the last time the church was on fire."

Can you? I'm not interested in knowing about when a church building burnt down...but rather, if you've ever seen a church on fire?

What are you, crazy, Carver? Take a look at the church in the USA. It's on fire right now. You've got Presbyterian churches voting to leave the denomination over sexuality, ordination, and other concerns. Our sister denominations are rocked by scandals involved with clergy sexual abuse or financial misconduct or who knows what else. The church IS on fire, Dave.

I agree – to a point. The church is on fire, but the things I've just mentioned are not the characteristics of that fire. In fact, I would say that a church that has made sexuality, ordination, money, or something other than the life and ministry of Jesus the Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit the defining characteristic of its existence is a church that is not on fire – it's a church that is losing steam or blowing smoke.

So where is the fire? Well, let me first mention one more place where we lose focus. For a long time, the church operated under a strategy that focused on fire, all right. We kept talking about Hell – you know, the lake of fire, eternal torment, "the place downstairs". Our policy for church growth seemed to be based on frightening people – essentially, scaring the Hell out of them – so that they would turn to Jesus and come to church. I don't think that's what Jesus had in mind when he sent his disciples into the world to proclaim the Good News: "Turn, or burn, friends! Come on over here and be with us! You won't burn. You might freeze; you might be bored to death; you might get onto a committee...but you won't burn! Come to church! It's safe here!"

In this theological framework, the main motivation for turning your life over to the Lord is fear. And once you've said the sinner's prayer and signed up, you don't have to do anything – because you're safe. Amen.

Except that's not how it goes in Acts Chapter 2. Where's the fire there? In today's scripture reading, the fire is in the church. Oh, it's not in the church building of course – it couldn't be, because church buildings didn't exist yet. No, the fire is in the church itself – there are tongues of flame on the people who have gathered.

You see that, right? The church is in worship. They are praying. They are following the instructions that Jesus gave them in chapter 1 – “wait here, and you will receive power.” The fire comes when the followers of Christ are obedient to his commands and doing what he tells them to do.

And what is the result of this little conflagration? They pour out into the street, share the good news, and 3000 people believed that Good News. So far as I can tell, in one day, the church grew from 120 people to more than 3100. I am really bad at math, but I think that’s an increase of 2600%. Give or take. It is just amazing.

Now, I want to talk to those of you who would say that you are Christians. You are believers. You are the church. I know that there are some folks in the room who are here because it’s the Open Door celebration, or because you wanted to come with your friend, or whatever. This part of the sermon – it’s not for you. Don’t go anywhere, because I’m going to need you in a few moments. But if you’re not a Christian, you can feel free to relax, check your text messages, replay in your mind the stunning conclusion to the most recent season of *American Idol*, or whatever. Relax.

Now – the rest of you. Let me tell you, brothers and sisters in Christ, that fire changes the church. Fire of any sort.

Churches that are characterized by conflict or warfare will see that kind of fire destroy their fellowship. I’ve been a part of congregations that, as they gather, the first question they want to know is, “Are you on my side here?” That kind of adversarial relationship weakens our ability to share the love and hope of Jesus Christ, and I pray that we are spared that kind of fire.

Churches that build themselves on the notion that going to church is a lot better than going to Hell are, at best, filled with people who are not necessarily eager to give themselves to teaching, fellowship, the breaking of the bread, or prayers – those folks are simply glad that they’ve already crossed over the line and they are home free now. There is nothing left for them to do, because they’ve already escaped Hell. Great. Now what?

But churches that are filled with believers whose hearts are aflame with a passion for the Lord and his people; churches who seek to develop believers into people of maturity and zeal and commitment and energy and ardor...those are churches that are changing the world and living out Christ’s commands.

Now let me ask you, Christian: do you know anyone who has that sort of fire? Do you know anyone who has sold out to Jesus Christ, not out of fear, but out of love? Right now, I am thinking of someone who is conscious of their need for Jesus’ presence in their life; who is eager to love and share and help and serve...I’m thinking of a person who arranges their daily schedule, including work, around opportunities to give the kinds of love that this person has received from Jesus. I’m thinking about a person who is on fire.

Do you know who I mean? Do you know a person like that? If you do, I want you to raise your hand. Don’t say anything yet – but I need to make sure that I’m not the only person who’s noticed this. Do you know someone who fits the description I’ve just mentioned? OK – hold that thought.

AHEM....now, can I have everyone's attention? People who are not Christians, I'd like to ask you to rejoin us for a moment here. Thanks. Here's the deal: the other folks around you are going to shout a name in just a moment. I think it would be really cool if you would get to know the person whose name we're about to shout.

All right, Christians – you've got your person in mind, right? OK. On the count of 3, I want you just to speak that name in a politely conversational, "outside voice". Who fits that description that I've named? 1....2....3.... [name].

Well great googly-moogly! You've named more than one person. I didn't see that coming. OK, that's a lie. Of course I saw it coming. One of the things that gives me real hope for this city and this neighborhood is the fact that this church is on fire.

No, of course you're not perfect. We are not conflict-free. We are not who we are going to be. But the reality is that there are a lot of people in this room who are sold out to Jesus. People who are on fire.

And this weekend, we have celebrated that in many of us, a place called the Open Door has helped to ignite or stoke that fire. The Open Door is one of the ways in which this congregation helps our neighbors to know God's intentions for peace and wholeness and justice and love. Together, we can praise God for the ways in which this important ministry is helping us to be the kinds of people we were born to be.

Now, if you are not a believer, I'd love to invite you to do one thing. I'd like to ask you to remember ONE of the names that you heard a few moments ago. And I'd like to ask you to keep an eye on that person. Spend some time together. Get to know her or him. You'll discover, I bet, that this is a person with some problems. This is a person who's still dealing with some issues in their life. But this is also a person who knows whose they are. A person who is learning to make life-decisions based on the places that Jesus is sending them. Someone who knows where they are heading.

Here's what I think, my friends: we all want to know what's important. We all yearn to know why we are here and what there is for us to do. Praise God for sending us neighbors who help us grow in this way. Praise God for places to practice our faith. Praise God for a church that is on fire – because that is Good News for everyone. I praise God for you today. Amen.