

## Playing With Matches

*When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability. Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. Amazed and astonished, they asked, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs--in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power." All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "What does this mean?" But others sneered and said, "They are filled with new wine." (Acts 2:1-13, NRSV)*

One of the first things we learn as a child—right after “don’t talk to strangers” and “look both ways before crossing the street”—is “don’t play with matches.” The obvious reason for this lesson is matches can start a fire, and once a fire starts things can get burned. Fire is dangerous.

I have various memories of the dangerous side of fire. I remember looking out the window of my childhood home seeing the neighbor’s car on fire. By the time the fire truck showed up, the policeman who lived down the street had already run over with his own fire extinguisher to put it out. I also remember the loud ringing and the overwhelming fear that I had blown my ear off when a firecracker I was lighting went off next to my head. Finally, I recall the night in my college dorm that Rusty, the guy across the hall, thought it would be fun to douse tennis balls with fire and throw them down the hallway. Thankfully, someone with more brains kicked those “not-so-great balls of fire” into the shower and promptly put them out. Fire can be dangerous, especially when you are careless or just plain stupid when using it.

Yet, fire has its uses and it can also be beautiful. I can remember a bonfire on the beach shared with good friends. We shared light, warmth and friendship. I have memories of curling up in front of the fire on Christmas Eve feeling safe and warm and wondering how exactly was Santa going to get down the chimney when we had a fire going? The smell of burning leaves was not only a useful way to get rid of yard waste but the end of fun days endlessly jumping into piles of leaves that my dad raked up. Also, I remember driving through a national forest that had been ravaged by a forest fire the previous year. I was shocked to see the new flowers and plants that had sprouted up because the old

dead underbrush had been burned away. Fire can provide light, warmth and safety, and it can even clear the way for new growth and life.

Today is the Sunday when Christians around the world celebrate Pentecost. On the original Day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit arrived and it took a ragtag group of Jewish followers of a Messiah that had been executed and made them into a movement that would spread throughout the known world. We read in today's scripture that the Spirit descended upon the disciples of Jesus with the sound of a rushing wind and flames that looked like tongues. The disciples quickly learned that the fire of the Spirit could be dangerous (it opened them up to ridicule and persecution), but it could also bring new light and life.

This amazing act of the Spirit occurred during the Feast of Weeks, fifty days after Passover. (It's from the 50 days that Christians gave their own celebration the name *Pente-cost*.) The Jewish festival celebrated the harvest and it was the time when faithful Jews would offer the first crops harvested as a sacrifice to God (see Leviticus 23:15-16). It was a tangible expression of thanks for the blessings of the harvest and a recognition that a person's possessions are in fact merely on loan from God. (The example of the Feast of Weeks raises the question of why Christians never established a similar celebration. We do not have a day where we offer up our first paycheck, stock dividend or tax rebate. Maybe we should remember that at stewardship time.)

With the coming of the Holy Spirit in wind and fire, a new kind of harvest occurred, one not of crops but of people coming to accept the crazy idea that God cared for each of them regardless of their nationality or language. What began as a meeting of disciples in a quiet and secluded room erupted in such a display of pyrotechnics that the whole city showed up to watch the show. Suddenly a group of bumpkins off of the farm back in Galilee began proclaiming the works of God in every language known. People from all over the world heard the Gospel of Christ preached in their own tongue. It was as if everyone in town from the festival suddenly had one of those headsets they use at the United Nations where translators translate the speech of one dignitary for all of the assembled ambassadors.

I don't know if you've ever been in another country where English was not the primary language, but for me it was always a major relief when in the midst of a crowd of people speaking a language I didn't understand, suddenly I would hear English being spoken. When I went to China while in college, I only bothered to learn one thing in Chinese, "Where is the bathroom?" I figured that as long as I could find a restroom everything else would be just fine. I'm pretty sure that whatever I ended up saying was something other than what I meant to communicate, because my efforts to speak this phrase in Chinese always resulted in puzzled or even worried looks. Usually, someone who spoke English would see the babbling American and come to my aid. To suddenly hear words that made sense in the midst of a cacophony of words that did not make sense was shocking (not to mention a major relief in more ways than one).

The people in Jerusalem that day from other countries must have felt a similar shock of recognition when they heard their own language being spoken. Some reacted with awe

and wonder, while others assumed that the disciples must have been dipping into the alcohol a little early that day. When the Spirit of God moves, the results may provoke awe or derision. The fire may provide heat and light or it may burn.

I'm not sure if most of us would know the Holy Spirit if it came and bit us on the nose. As Christians, we claim to believe in the Trinity, expressed in masculine metaphors as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The first two we can normally get a handle on. God the Father is usually understood as the divine parent who lives up in heaven. This person of God is the Creator and the one who did all that stuff with the burning bush and the Red Sea and so on. God the Son or Jesus Christ we know from reading the Gospels. Jesus is the one who was born in Bethlehem, died on the cross and rose from the dead. The last person of God, the Holy Spirit, however, is much more ambiguous.

If you grew up hearing, this person of God described as the Holy Ghost, like me, you probably thought in terms of a floating bed sheet or maybe Casper. The Holy Spirit sort of hung around haunting places, usually churches, and was best avoided if possible. I often wondered what the point was of having a Holy Spirit at all. What did it do anyway? The church of my childhood always seemed a little embarrassed by the Holy Spirit. After all, we didn't want to come across like one of "those crazy churches" that believed a "little too much" in the Holy Spirit.

The problem of the Trinity is that it ultimately is a mystery. How can God be both three and one? Yet, mystery is not an excuse to give up trying to understand more of God. I've heard the Trinity explained with various metaphors. The Trinity is like water. It can be solid, liquid and gas without changing its chemical composition. The Trinity is like a person. For example, I can be a father, a son, and a brother, but I'm still one person. Such metaphors are helpful, because they help us to understand how God can take different forms or roles, but metaphors by their nature raise as many questions as answers.

I tend to think that our inability to grasp the idea of the Holy Spirit has to do with our modern mindset. We sort of naturally smash together the material and spiritual and think of God as spirit and present everywhere, but the ancients understood things differently. There were rules about how the divine could work in the world of mortals and how the spiritual and physical could interact. God was in heaven, spatially separated from humanity. Only through a tear in the normal order of things—a bolt from the blue, burning shrubbery, etc.—could God leave one realm behind and enter the world of humans. In Jesus, God came down in the form of a specific person at a specific place and time. Jesus was not everywhere at once. So, in the form of the Holy Spirit, God moves throughout the entire human world at once. The Spirit was a means of explaining how God could work everywhere on this plane at once. Today, we tend to blur the distinctions between the persons of the Trinity, perhaps because we don't really need to worry about the mechanics of how God works or perhaps we have other motives.

In addition to our problems with the Holy Spirit on a conceptual level, I also think that we have a problem with the Spirit on an ethical level. If we suddenly admit that God

could show up anywhere in our lives and mess things up, then life becomes more complicated. It's much better to have a God that exists only in pleasant stories with good morals than to have one that might actually expect you to change your lifestyle. Far better to have a God that stays where all good deities should remain—in church to be visited one day a week—than to have a Spirit that can be anywhere at any time to interfere with all that you have planned. God as Spirit is awfully inconvenient.

Today as we celebrate Christian Education Sunday and pass out Bibles to our children and youth, I wonder if we have any idea what we're really doing. You might say that we are handing out matches for the kids to play with; oh, not actual matches, but stories that can light a fire in the lives of our children. Those flames can give light and heat, but they can also burn. I mean, what happens if the kids actually start believing this stuff?

We grown-ups have long ago left behind the stories of Sunday School. Sure, those stories may have contributed to our morals and helped us out on our standardized tests, but they're just stories right? If God really was Spirit that could do miraculous things, then God could show up and start trouble. The Spirit might make me do things or say things that would leave me looking foolish. I might have to re-think how I spend my time or my money. I might have to rearrange my schedule to make more time for others. The Spirit might bring me into contact with people very different from myself—the kind of people I'm not comfortable being around—people who do not look like me or act like me or live in the same neighborhood as me. This whole Spirit-thing could mess up my entire life. It would be so much easier if the Spirit just remained a story for Sunday School, or would it?

Like a fire that gets out of control, letting the Spirit of God into our lives just a little bit could have dangerous results. Our priorities may change and so might our lives. People may wonder if we have lost it or if we've been drinking. Yet, just as a fire may clear away the scrub brush and make way for new growth, so also might the Spirit clear away the empty and unhealthy things in our lives to make way for new life. The reaction of some may be derision, but the reaction of others could be awe.

Playing with the Spirit can have major consequences. Just as one match could start a fire, one prayer could start a chain reaction that could change your life. One small interaction with the Spirit could grow into a flame that brings light, warmth and cleansing. Whether we realize it or not, on Pentecost Sunday we are playing with matches.

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## **Pastoral Prayer**

God of all people, regardless of their country or language, we live in a world where it seems hard to overlook our differences. War continues in places like Iraq, Afghanistan, Israel and Palestine, The Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Chechnya. Closer to home, even here on Long Island we learned this week of several teenagers being attacked apparently just because they were Hispanic. In a world where differences are often excuses for violence, help us as people of faith to celebrate the uniqueness of each person that you have created. Give us a new Pentecost, where your Spirit can enable us to build bridges rather than walls. Give us the courage to allow the Spirit into our lives so that it can burn away all of our prejudice and insecurity. Burn Spirit burn. Amen.