Sunday, August 19, 2001
**PLAYING WITH FIRE**
Luke 12:49-56

All the parents I know do their best to instruct their children on the dangers of playing with fire, and I'm glad they do. Why are children tempted to play with fire? Because fire is mysterious, even for adults. You can watch the flames in a fireplace or the flame of a single burning candle for hours. Even though you know the dangers of fire, there's also something relaxing and almost hypnotic in watching a flame.

So it's understandable that from our earliest origins, we human beings have been fascinated with fire, its power, and its mystery. It's not surprising, therefore, that fire plays a significant symbolic role in all religions and especially in the Bible. In the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament, fire is a common symbol of holiness.

In the Bible stories, when God wants to stir things up, God comes with fire. God spoke to Moses out of the burning bush. Then a pillar of fire, sent from God, guided the people of Israel under the leadership of Moses through the wilderness to the promised land. When Moses went up on Mt. Sinai to get the Ten Commandments, the people saw fire on the mountain.

In the New Testament story of the baptism of Jesus, before he was baptized, John the Baptist said, "The one who is coming after me will baptize you with water and fire." And on the day of Pentecost, when the people experienced the power of God's Spirit, it seemed to them like "tongues of fire."

Fire continues to be a powerful symbol of God's Spirit, and it has always had specialized uses in worship. A perpetual fire burned in the Temple in Jerusalem. We light candles on the Communion table in our churches. Some churches use the symbol of the eternal flame. Fire is an image of the presence of God and the power of God's Spirit.

Now you can understand the context for Jesus saying one day to his followers, "I have come to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled." He was saying that he had come to stir things up, to get the power of God's Spirit moving again in a big way, so as to reveal the presence and love of God. And to do this, he wants to set you on fire.

But as I said earlier, playing with fire can be dangerous. You run the risk of being burned. On the other hand, not to play with fire or not to be on fire for something worthwhile is to live a life without passion. To not be on fire is to be lukewarm, or even cold or frozen.

In my experience, the people who enjoy life the most and who accomplish the most for the good in this world are those who are on fire — those who have something worthwhile to live for, those who have a reason for living, those who look forward to going to work every day at their chosen vocation. It's not by accident that our Singles Ministry for its September Retreat weekend has chosen for its theme and objective: "Find Your Passion."

A few months ago, the senior minister of one of our churches in Chicago came to Lincoln to be here for an evening and a day to meet our staff, to learn about this congregation so that he could be a more effective minister where he is. He was impressed with the dedication of our staff, and he asked me at the end of the day, "What's the secret?" I told him that all of our staff members have a passion for their work. They are on fire. They love what they are doing. They

believe they are changing people's lives for the better and, in so doing, contributing something positive to the world. They see their work as being both fun and exciting. That's what Jesus was talking about when he said to his followers, "I have come to bring fire to the earth."

This fire is available to everyone. You do not have to work in a church to be on fire and accomplish something positive for God. You do not have to be famous. I read about people and meet people every day who are on fire, who have a burning passion for life and for what they are doing in this world.

Here is a carpenter who loves his work. He is a craftsman. He is dedicated to doing the best job he can. Here is a researcher in a laboratory. She may never make the news, but she loves doing basic research and making new discoveries. Here is a librarian. He loves books and takes good care of them and is grateful that he can suggest books to people and help them find what they need. Here is a retired person who works as a volunteer in the hospital or as a mentor or tutor of someone who needs help in learning. These people are on fire.

I meet so many teachers who are deeply dedicated. They have a passion for their work, for helping students make new discoveries. I also meet many volunteers in this church who are on fire — church school teachers, choir members, greeters, ushers, board members, Stephen Ministers, volunteers who help in the church office or at the reception desk. They are doing their volunteer work because they are on fire. They want to make a contribution. They enjoy being a part of this congregation's ministry.

William Willimon, chaplain at Duke University, tells the story of a recruiting visit by an organization called "Teach America." This organization seeks to recruit some of the best college and university students to go and teach in some of the most difficult schools in the country.

A few years ago, a recruiter from the "Teach America" program made a visit to the Duke University campus. This creative recruiter looked out at the crowd of Duke students and said, "I can tell by looking at you that I have probably come to the wrong place. Someone told me this was a BMW campus, and I can believe it by looking at you. Just looking at you, I can tell that all of you are a success and headed for successful careers.

"And yet, here I stand, hoping to talk somebody into giving away your life in the toughest job you can ever have. I am looking for people to go into South Los Angeles and teach in some of the most difficult schools in the world. Last year, two of our teachers were killed while on the job.

"But I can tell, just by looking at you, that none of you are interested in that. And yet, if by chance, just some of you happen to be interested, I have some brochures here to tell you about Teach America after this meeting is over."

What kind of response do you think that recruiter received? Maybe a few polite thank yous and then a rush to the exit? But would you believe it? A number of students rushed to the aisles, ran to the front, and took the brochures. Why did they behave this way? Because they wanted to give their lives to something larger than themselves. They wanted to be part of an adventure that would make a lasting contribution to the world. They were set on fire and playing with fire.

But there's a danger in playing with fire. You can see what might happen if some of these Duke students get fired up about "Teach America." I have no doubt that the parents of some of

these students did not send their offspring to Duke University to pursue a career in some far-off, dangerous place with low pay. Some of the parents, at least, would not define success in those terms. It's possible that for some of these students to go back home and say to their parents, "I'm going to teach in a ghetto," would create a bit of a controversy.

It's true, of course, that some of the same students could also be on fire because of their passion to become an attorney, a physician, a physicist, a professor, a banker, a computer programmer, a musician, an artist, or any one of a number of other vocations. What Jesus is talking about when he said, "I have come to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled," is the importance of having a passion for doing something positive and good in whatever way you can. A purposeful life requires a sense of passion. It is to live a life in which you use to the best of your abilities the talents and gifts that God has given you.

You've heard the old saying, "Anything worth doing is worth doing well." That's what Jesus is talking about here. If something is worth doing, it's worth having a passion for — being on fire for it.

It also means that risk is involved because when you have passion, when you play with fire, there is always the danger of being burned. This being burned can take many forms. Jesus was crucified because of his passion. Martin Luther King Jr. and others like him were killed because of their passion for justice.

There are many other ways of being burned. Some people will misunderstand your passion. Others will reject your attempts to be of help. Sometimes you will fail completely. Family members can be disappointed in your decisions and think you are wasting your life. Your spouse can be resentful because of all the time you are spending at the hospice. I think it was Nietzsche who said, "No good deed goes unpunished." However, Nietzsche did not go on to say, "Therefore do not do any good deeds." Too many people are afraid of passion, afraid of taking a risk for something good. They are afraid of being burned, so they choose to be lukewarm or miserable instead. I hope you are not in that category.

Some people are also afraid of passion, afraid of being on fire, and are therefore miserable because they tell themselves that life is unfair and there's nothing they can do about it. Have you ever done that? Have you ever told yourself that you've been dealt a lousy hand in the card game of life and you might as well accept it? There's nothing you can do about it. All the bad things that have ever happened to you are the result of your bad luck, and you are doomed to be miserable. Then you are telling yourself that it's better to be miserable than to risk being burned. If you are always lukewarm, you are never in danger of being burned.

There are other people who avoid passion in their living, avoid being on fire, because they refuse to consider any new possibilities. They want to stay in their old, worn-out ruts. They don't want to believe that God could do anything new or that they could learn anything new.

Here are several suggestions to help you not be afraid to play with fire. They are not listed in any particular order, but they are all connected. Each person will have to decide where to begin. Following them will help you get your passion for life and service started again in case the fire in your life has started to flicker and is in danger of dying out completely.

First, recognize and be aware of your own mortality. You are not going to live forever. Therefore, realize that now is the time to rediscover the meaning and direction of your life, and

maybe that will involve the decision to find a new path and go in a new direction. For others, it will mean blooming again where you are now planted.

Second, if you have been burned in the past because of your passion for doing something good, acknowledge your losses, griefs, and pain. The fact that you have experienced such things can make you a more understanding and compassionate person.

Third, be thankful and savor the ways in which you have been blessed. The more you are grateful for your own blessings, the more you can be a blessing to others and ignite a fire in their lives.

Fourth, no matter where you are in life — young, midlife, or longer living — it is always helpful to review and revise the ways in which you want to contribute to society. You might discover other gifts and talents that you have not yet used, or others that have been dormant for a time and need to be reborn. You can have a passion for life and make a valuable contribution regardless of your age or station in life.

Fifth, deepen your connections with your spouse, if you have one, your friends, your family members, and with God. God's fire most frequently works through the power and support of loving relationships. In order to deepen your connections with others, this will often mean seeking forgiveness and being forgiving. It is very helpful to clear the decks of your relationships if they are strained.

Sixth, accept and appreciate the mystery in life and in your relationship with God. There is always more truth to explore. Amen.