Sunday, August 15, 2004
THE MYSTERY OF FIRE
Luke 12:49-56

According to this story in Luke's gospel, Jesus is quoted as saying, "I have come to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled!" What was he talking about? Before I discuss this unusual statement from Jesus, it will be helpful to examine briefly why fire is such a powerful metaphor in religious history.

Fire can be good news or bad news. Fire is mysterious. 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 can also be something relaxing and almost hypnotic in watching a flame. Fire can warm you.

Human beings from their earliest origins have been fascinated with fire, its power, and its mystery. It's not surprising, therefore, that fire plays a significant role in all religions, and especially in Bible stories. In these stories, when God wants to stir things up, fire is involved. God spoke to Moses out of the burning bush. Then a pillar of fire guided the people of Israel under the leadership of Moses through the wilderness to the promised land. When Moses was on Mt. Sinai in the presence of God, the people who waited for him said that it seemed as if the top of the mountain was on fire.

While they were waiting for Moses to return, fire played a significant role. The people built a huge fire and used it to melt all their jewelry and other precious metals, and Aaron formed it into a golden calf, which became the center of their worship. They used fire to make a false god.

When Moses came down the mountain and found the people deep in their idolatry, he was very angry. According to the story, he destroyed the idol: "He burnt it with fire, and ground it into powder, mixed it with water, and made the children of Israel drink it."

Then Moses confronted his brother Aaron and demanded an explanation. His excuse was: "It's not my fault. It's the people's fault. They gave me their jewelry. I threw it into the fire and there came out this calf." He blamed the fire.

Fire is a powerful religious symbol. In the New Testament story of the baptism of Jesus, before he was baptized, John the Baptist said, "The one coming after me will baptize you with water and fire." In other words, you will experience the energy of God in Jesus as you have never experienced it before. And on the day of Pentecost, when the followers of Jesus experienced the power of God's Spirit, they described it as "tongues of fire."

A perpetual fire burned in the Temple in Jerusalem. We light candles on the communion table in every service. Many churches have a light called the "eternal flame," which is always kept on as a symbol of God's continuing presence. We have that kind of eternal flame in our prayer room. Fire is a metaphor for the energizing presence of God and the power of God's Spirit.

Outside the religious realm, fire is a frequently used symbol. A huge ceremony surrounds the lighting of the "Olympic Flame," which will burn in Athens, Greece, during the summer games this August. This flame is kept alive through the years and will be carried by a series of lighted torches to the site of the next Olympic Games.

“FIRE IN THE BELLY.” This phrase is often used to describe what it means to be driven and passionate. It signifies vitality, energy, and a dedication to doing good. It means having a passion for justice and the motivation to make positive contributions.

Now you can understand the context for what Jesus said to his followers: “I have come to bring fire to the earth.” He was saying that he had come to stir things up, to energize people, to get the power of God’s Spirit moving again in a big way, so as to make known the presence and love of God.

Playing with fire can be dangerous. You take the risk of being burned. On the other hand, not to have fire in your belly is to live a life without the passion for doing something of worth. To not be on fire is to be lukewarm or even cold or frozen.

It’s been my experience that the people who enjoy life the most and who accomplish something for 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.

Several ministers from other large United Church congregations have visited here to meet our staff and learn about the creative ministries of this congregation. Every one of them has been impressed with the dedication of our staff and church members, and they ask, “What’s the secret?” I give the same answer each time. Our staff members have a passion for their work. They have “fire in the belly.” They love what they are doing. They know they are changing people’s lives for the good. They are certain they are making a positive contribution. It’s more than a job to earn a salary. They see their work as being fun and exciting. That’s what Jesus was talking about when he said, “I have come to bring fire to the earth.”

This fire of the love of God is available to everyone. You do not have to work in a church to be on fire and to increase among people the love of God and neighbor. You do not have to be famous. I meet people every day who are on fire, who have a burning passion for life and for what they are doing in this world.

I continue to meet teachers who are deeply dedicated — Sunday Church School teachers that Judi has recruited, vacation church school teachers and helpers, preschool teachers, kindergarten, elementary school, middle school, high school — they all have a passion for their work. They love what they do in helping students make new discoveries and increasing their knowledge.

Here is a librarian. She loves books and is grateful when she can suggest books to people and help them find what they need. I meet retired people who work as volunteers in hospitals or as mentors or tutors for those who need help learning. They are on fire.

Here is a researcher in a laboratory. He may never make the news, but he loves doing basic research and contributing to new discoveries.

In July, I was ordained into the Christian ministry. For three years before that, I was a licensed minister — so it’s now fifty years in the ministry. I have never regretted my decision to be a minister, even though there have been some difficult times. I like to think of myself as being on fire.

A few years ago, I read about an organization called “Teach America.” This organization seeks to recruit some of the most talented college and university students to go and teach in some of the worst public schools in our country.

William Willimon, Chaplain at Duke University, described what happened when a recruiter from Teach America came to the Duke University campus. His recruiting speech was unusual. He 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. 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 the hollows of West Virginia, into the ghettos of 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.”

He continued, “I can tell 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 involved when you play with fire. You can see what might happen if some of these Duke students get fired up about “Teach America.” Some of the parents of these students did not send their offspring to Duke University to follow a career in some far-off dangerous place with low pay. Some of the parents probably would not define success in those terms. It’s possible that when some of these students go back home and say to their parents, “I’m going to teach in a ghetto,” that would create a bit of a controversy.

There are many students on fire because of their passion to become an attorney, a physician, a scientist, a professor, a banker, a computer specialist, a musician, an artist, or any one of a number of other vocations.

What Jesus was 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. He was saying that a genuine life, a purposeful life, requires passion. It is to live a life in which you use the best of your abilities, talents, and gifts which God has given you. You’ve heard the old saying, “Anything worth doing is worth doing well.” That’s what Jesus was talking about here. If something is worth doing, it’s worth having a passion for, being on fire for it.

It also means a 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 the fire that burned in his soul. 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 may 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 with the homeless. I think it was Nietzsche who said, “No good deed goes unpunished.” However, he did not go on to say, “Therefore do not do any good deeds.”

Fire can be dangerous. That’s why some people are afraid of being on fire, afraid of passion, afraid of taking a risk for something good. They don’t want to be burned, and so they choose being lukewarm or being cold instead. I hope that’s not true of you.

Here are several suggestions to guide you so that you will not be afraid of being on fire. First, remember your mortality. You are not going to live forever. Therefore now is the time to re-examine the meaning and direction of your life. If the fire in your belly is only a small flame, or if it has gone out, it could be that a change of direction or a new project in your present vocation could rekindle the fire or make the fire burn stronger.

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

Second, if you have been burned in the past because of your passion for doing something good, acknowledge your pain and move beyond it.

Third, be thankful for 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. Amen.