



**Pastor Robyn Hogue**

## **Pentecost Sunday**

# **On Fire for What?**

**Numbers 11:24-30; Acts 2:1-8**

**June 4, 2017**

**Skyline Presbyterian Church**

Have you ever received a gift and well, you were just not quite sure what do with it? Larry and I received a couple of the ugliest salt and pepper shakers as a wedding gift from my college academic advisor. They were each about eight inches tall and three inches in diameter. They were knobby, ceramic things in delft blue. Now, to be fair, there was a small delft blue band around the outside edge of our first set of dishes, but these beauties were definitely not on our gift registry! We couldn't gift them on to the next wedding as we did with several of the multiple hibachi cook stoves we received that summer. We simply had to gift them forward to Goodwill.

You've most likely received gifts you didn't know what to with as well. Men, you've probably received flashy ties that you wouldn't be caught wearing. Women, you've most likely received perfume that you wouldn't dare wear for fear of dropping everyone in the room into a faint. There are some gifts we do not know how to handle.

Now, let me change the subject for a moment. Let's talk about fire. Fire is fascinating. Young children say they want to grow up to be firefighters. If we hear that there is a fire in the neighborhood, chances are we will go out to watch it...which, of course, creates a big problem for those kids who did grow up to be firefighters. On a winter's evening, we like building a fire, not just for the warmth, but for the chance to watch it do its work. On a summer's evening, we enjoy gathering around a campfire, not just for the warmth, but for the sheer pleasure of being near it. Fire fascinates us.

Now, let's combine those two thoughts: gifts and fire. I wonder what might happen if someone gave you a gift of fire. Chances are, you would be fascinated by it. But what in the world would it mean? Perhaps the early Christians wondered. After all, that was the Lord's first gift to the church on that momentous and earth-shaking Pentecost...fire.

You remember. The faithful had gathered there in that room near the temple in Jerusalem, 120 of them. They had been spending their time in prayer, choosing another apostle to replace Judas and talking among themselves about the ministry of their Lord Jesus. Just prior to His ascension, Jesus had told them to go into Jerusalem and not to leave the city until they had received the gift of which He had spoken earlier, the gift of the Holy Spirit. So, they did. They were gathered there to wait, not quite sure what this gift was all about.

Yes, they had heard something about this Holy Spirit before. During their last meal with Jesus on the night before His crucifixion, the Lord had told them that it was necessary for Him to leave them so that He might send them another comforter, another one who would walk beside them, one who would encourage them, one who would instruct them, for all of those ideas were wrapped up in the name the Lord used to describe the Spirit. They were not sure what Jesus was talking about, but they did not let on. A bit later, the Lord told them that this comforter, the Holy Spirit, would be a guide to them; the Spirit would guide them in all truth. Again, they were not certain what to make of it, but they kept quiet. And then, just before Jesus was taken up into heaven, He told them that they would receive power, a supernatural power, the Holy Spirit, that would drive them to the ends of the earth with the message of the Gospel. Again, they did not understand.

Suddenly, the group heard a noise. It sounded like a windstorm...a hurricane...a tornado...the sound of some tremendous force. But no buildings were destroyed, no doors slammed shut. As they looked around to see what was happening, they noticed that above each head was what appeared to be a flame...the fire that was Christ's first gift to His church...the fire that was the Holy Spirit.

I wonder if the disciples had any more idea what to do with a gift like that than we do. I doubt it. But to their eternal credit, and to our undying benefit, they did not think of possessing the gift; they let that gift possess them.

The fire was exactly as advertised. It proved to be a comforter, an encourager, an instructor and challenger. Look what happened to Peter. To say the least, this big fisherman had always been a brash fellow. He had been brash enough to leave his fishing business, to drop his livelihood when Jesus had said to him, "Come follow Me." He had been brash enough to try things that were beyond human comprehension like healing sick people and walking on water. He had been brash enough to take a sword to the servant of the High Priest in Gethsemane despite being tremendously outnumbered. But brashness has its limitations. Peter was also cowardly...just cowardly enough to deny that he had ever known Jesus when confronted by a young servant girl. Yes, that fisherman was brash...but not brash enough in himself to do what he did on Pentecost.

Now, all of a sudden, here was this same Peter standing up in the center of the city where the life of His Lord had been taken seven weeks earlier, proclaiming to all who would listen the message of a risen Savior.

Peter was a changed man. The Holy Spirit gave him comfort in place of his fear, gave him encouragement in place of his questions, gave him a challenge in place of his silence. Peter had the fire...or perhaps it would be better said, the fire had Peter.

It has worked the same through the centuries since Pentecost. There was that young man from north Africa, a brilliant thinker, a man anxious for a relationship with God, a man concerned about his own sin, a man afraid to make any commitment to Jesus Christ because his lifestyle was incompatible with any real Christian witness. He too was taken by that fire and was turned into one of the greatest theologians in history. His name was Augustine.

There was another young man, a priest in an Augustinian monastery in the sixteenth century. He had become concerned about the direction his church was taking; he was concerned that the church had its priorities skewed. The fire took him, comforted him in the face of the hostility of his superiors, encouraged him to share what he felt with his people, challenged him to press on with the task of stopping the abuses. The fire took him...Martin Luther...and led him to begin a reformation that has continued to this day.

Two hundred years later, another young man was taken by the fire. He saw problems in his own church, the Church of England. And, as might be expected, he faced fierce opposition. Although he was a priest in the church, he was denied the right to preach, so he took to the open air. He was comforted in the face of angry church officials; he was encouraged as he saw thousands respond to his preaching; he was challenged to fan the flames of revival in his land. And the result was what history has called the Great Awakening, all because that young man, John Wesley, went to a prayer meeting on Aldersgate Street in London and, as he wrote later, felt his "heart strangely warmed," warmed by that fire of Pentecost.

The Spirit comforts, encourages, challenges and gives power. Might this be why fire fascinates us? It can do more in minutes than a great throng could do in a lifetime. Peter knew that power. Augustine knew that power. Martin Luther knew that power. John Wesley knew that power.

It is here today. It is still the Lord's birthday gift to the church. Unfortunately, we treat it as we would

one of those horrible ties or smelly perfumes. We don't know what to do with it, and, quite honestly, we seem to live as if we would just as soon not have it.

I suspect we are afraid of it. We read the account of what happened to those early disciples at Pentecost; we see what a tremendous effect the coming of the Spirit had on them, what an unbelievable difference was made in their lives; and somehow, we know that if that same Spirit came to us in that way, if the fire would take hold of us like it did them, things would never be the same. Might we be afraid of that?

On the other hand, we are still drawn to its power. We think, "Wow, what great things could happen in us and through us if we would open ourselves up to the Spirit like Peter and the rest did! What a witness we would have! What a church we would have!" And it is true! We would be given such power that things would never be the same again.

Do we want that kind of power here? Or are we too afraid of it? Do we want the fire of Pentecost to burn in Pierce County? Or are we worried that it might call from us more than we want to give and disrupt our comfortable lives?

The Holy Spirit is a gift who brings comfort, encouragement, challenge, guidance, and, most of all, power. Will we treat the Spirit as a gift we would just as soon do without? Will we simply be fascinated by the Spirit as we watch others set on fire? Or will we pray, "Lord, give US that fire." This is my prayer for Skyline Presbyterian...and I hope...I hope...it is yours.