

As we've seen in our first reading this morning, Pentecost is a feast with vivid imagery. The mighty wind, soaring doves, languages pouring forth from the disciples – and, of course, fire.

Fire is a huge Pentecost image, so I thought I'd share with you two favorite quotations about Pentecost fire from two classic theologians who were celebrated in their day as fiery communicators of the Gospel of Jesus Christ: Phillips Brooks and Harry Emerson Fosdick – quotations that penetrate the heart of Pentecost.

The first quotation comes from Phillips Brooks, one-time rector of Trinity Church, Copley Square, in Boston, and, later, Bishop of Massachusetts. Brooks is probably best known as the author of “*O Little Town of Bethlehem.*” His quote is this: “**Nothing but fire...kindles fire.**”

The second is from Harry Emerson Fosdick, a Baptist who is probably best remembered as the long-time pastor of New York's Riverside Church, but also as the author of that great hymn, “*God of grace and God of glory.*” Here's his quote: “**If you want to set someone on fire, you have to *buuurn* a little bit yourself.**”

Now, just to make this fun, just to make it a bit different from the kind of sermon I typically preach, today's sermon is going to be interactive. I'm going to ask you to be a chorus of sorts. I will teach you a key part of each of these two quotations. And as we go along, I will point to you as a congregation, and ask you to remember your part of the line.

So let's activate our brains. Let's start with the first one: I'll say, “Nothing but fire...” and when I point, I want you to say, “**kindles fire.**” Let's try it: (*Repeat it, once or twice so people learn it.*)

The second quotation is this: “If you want to set someone on fire, you have to ...” Now here, you say the second part: “**burn a little bit yourself.**” (*repeat*)

OK, that should be enough to get you into the mood of this sermon, so let me move on – but keep listening, because you never know when I'm going to call on you.

Let's go back and consider the first Pentecost. The first Pentecost was like this. One hundred twenty people were gathered together. These first Christians were *waiting, waiting, waiting* for something special to happen to them, and they weren't quite sure *what* they were waiting for. They were waiting for the Holy Spirit to come, but they didn't know what that would mean. Then, suddenly, it was like a rush of wind into the room. The Holy Spirit came into their lives in a way they could in no way anticipate. Like

tongues of fire *above* them. Like tongues of fire *inside* of them. They felt the power of God inside of them, and they rushed out of that building into the streets. They went from street to street and home to home and neighbor to neighbor and family to family and nation to nation... Fire was being kindled:

- “Nothing but fire ... ***kindles fire.***”
- If you want to set someone on fire, you have to ... ***burn a little bit yourself.***”

What happened is that those Apostles first went to a village or town. They planted a church, and then went to a *second* village or town, and planted a church. Then they went to a *third* village or town and planted another church. They ... whoops, I'm getting ahead of myself. We have to go back to that *first* village or town and look more carefully. We have to go back to that first village, because *before* the Apostles went on to the *second* village, they left a group of people in that *first* village who were committed to Jesus Christ. The Greek word is “***laos.***” They were called the “***laos,***” which means, “the laity,” “the people,” “the people of God.” It was these people, these people of God in each village who spread the Gospel from house to house and neighbor to neighbor and friend to friend and family to family. It was not the twelve, not the Apostles, not the clergy. It was ***laity***, the people of God, who brought people to faith in Jesus Christ and nurtured those souls into Christian maturity.

How did the laity do this? Did they do this by their own intelligence? By their years of seminary training? No. It's as simple as this:

- “Nothing but fire ... ***kindles fire.***”
- If you want to set someone on fire, you have to ... ***burn a little bit yourself.***”

Well, that's what happened in that first century. The first century was a great century of Christian expansion. The Church went to Ephesus, Rome...you name it, the Church went there within thirty years. From farm to farm, from village to village, from town to town. It was absolutely incredible, spreading across the whole known world.

The year is now 2019, and the flame of Jesus Christ is *still* spreading. You may not believe that, living as we do in demure, not-very-fiery New England, but it is still spreading like wildfire. The spreading flame of Pentecost is greater in this century than in the first century. I want to repeat that so you clearly hear it. *The spreading flame of Pentecost is greater in this century than in the first century.*

Let me give you a couple brief examples of this spreading wildfire on our planet today.

Let's start by talking about Africa. I saw this first-hand a decade ago, so I know from personal experience that it's true: Africa is the most rapidly-growing mission field in the

entire Christian church. The Anglican Church of Nigeria, for example, has experienced a 50% increase in membership since the start of this century, and a five-fold increase in membership since 1975. There are more Anglicans there than in the U.S., Canada, Australia, and New Zealand combined.

The same kind of growth has been occurring in Tanzania, Kenya, Uganda and... where I was, 10 years ago, Angola. How is it happening? Because of some great evangelistic program? Don't kid yourself. It's because ordinary people gave their lives to Jesus Christ, got themselves educated about the basics of Christianity, and actually find a way to speak of *and act upon* their new-found faith. In the case of the mission we visited in Angola, they dug water wells serving 3,000 households and, as the local distribution point for Episcopal Relief and Development, delivered over 9,000 mosquito nets to help prevent malaria.

Whenever the flame of Jesus Christ is spreading from village to village and town to town and city to city, across all of Africa, the pattern's the same:

- "Nothing but fire ... ***kindles fire.***"
- If you want to set someone on fire, you have to ... ***burn a little bit yourself.***"

This *isn't* just happening in Africa. Let's go to another continent. Let's go to Asia. Let's be more specific: let's go to Korea. A half century ago, Christianity was practically unheard of in Korea. Today, it is 20% Christian...within one-half century! And the fastest growing congregation in the entire Anglican Communion is found in Seoul, Korea, with a membership of more than 5,000. Like the people of Africa, these people meet in in lay peoples' homes, led by – that's right, *lay* people. This flame is now spreading to Indonesia, and the Philippines, and of all places, to what had once been our least productive mission field, Japan.

For years, the *Nippon Sei Ko Kai*, the Anglican Church in Japan, was an "ex-pat" church with very few indigenous Japanese. The Koreans are now sending missionaries to Japan and the Japanese church is growing like wildfire. Can you imagine that? Given the centuries-old enmity between these two peoples, it would seem impossible. But it is happening! These common and ordinary people understand that...

- "Nothing but fire ... ***kindles fire.***"
- If you want to set someone on fire, you have to ... ***burn a little bit yourself.***"

Well, that's the good news. Now I have to share with you the *bad* news. Let's talk about our Mother Church, the Church of England. As of 2000, 40% of the people in England belonged to the Church of England. But *belonging* and *participating* are two very different things. On Easter Sunday of that same year, only 4% of the members of the Church of England attended Easter Eucharist. Is it possible that the flame of Jesus

Christ is faltering a bit, so that there are very few flickering flames left? It would seem so.

Alas, that is now changing. And, here again, it's the *laity* who are beginning to turn things around. At last month's *Spring Renewal* conference in Manchester, we heard about this amazing change. New congregations are being planted all over England – and they're growing like crazy. Some are in church buildings. More, however, are in storefronts, and laundromats, and all kinds of places one wouldn't expect. One even meets in a bank lobby! Who forms the backbone of this unprecedented effort? You've got it: the *laity*. Clergy may have a *role*, but it is the person-to-person conversation, it's the small-group work, that's making the difference.

Which brings me to the good old United States. Actually, let me come a little closer – New England. In fact, let's narrow it down to the State of New Hampshire where we live, work and do ministry. New Hampshire's population during the first decade of this century grew by 7% and continues to grow vigorously – particularly here in the southern tier.

So how much did the Episcopal Church grow in that same decade in the State of New Hampshire? 7%? Uh, no, more like 0.7%. (At least we didn't follow the trend of the much of the rest of the Episcopal Church, which actually experienced *negative* growth.) The important question is: ***are we going to let that status quo remain?*** Where we live on New Hampshire's Seacoast, the population surrounding us is 60% unchurched. I know – there are some who don't like that term, but I don't have a better term to describe it.

There are thousands of non-church-attending people living around us. The big question for our two congregations is this: Do you, the *laity*, understand, not only with your heads but with your hearts, that for us to be a growing church in the State of New Hampshire, we have to embrace the words of our Episcopalian forebear Phillips Brooks:

“Nothing but fire ... ***kindles fire.***”

If we want to have the impact on our community we say we want to have, we need to keep firmly before us the words of Charles Emerson Fosdick:

If you want to set someone on fire, you have to ... ***burn a little bit yourself.***”

The principles that have been found to be true in the first and twenty-first centuries of Christian expansion, that have been found to be true in Africa, Asia, and even stodgy old England; can also be found to be true where we work and live here in New Hampshire.

- “Nothing but fire ... ***kindles fire.***”
- If you want to set someone on fire, you have to ... ***burn a little bit yourself.***”

It is *always* the *laity* empowered by the Holy Spirit who make the difference. And *that* is the message of Pentecost. Amen.