

Hannover International Worship

Petri Church Hannover

Pentecost Sunday

May 20, 2018

Sermon by Pastor Viola Chrzanowski

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen.

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

Fire!

This is an alert. An alarm call. You are sure to have everyone's immediate attention with this call.

I can imagine that even now, when I said the word just now, this may have given some of you a bit of a start.

Red is the color of fire. It is the signal color that calls for attention. Fire engines are red. A red

traffic light says: Stop! Careful! Watch out!

We even have the red alert in our church today. The paraments on the altar and on the pulpit are bright red. You enter the church and see it right away: Something is on fire here!

Where did the fire break out?

In some back room, some unimportant side building, a room no one has an eye on.

In this back room the disciples have shut themselves away since Jesus is no longer with them.

In this back room, the fire started.

Something like tongues of fire, as the translation has it, was to be seen above the heads of the disciples.

And they went and started telling everyone what they had experienced with Jesus. And everyone could understand what they said, no matter where people came from.

Fire is an important symbol of many Christian holidays. What would Christmas be without the candles? And on Easter morning, we celebrate lighting the Easter candle in our churches.

A small candle can lighten up a dark room.

A small spark can ignite a huge bush fire.

Fire is catching. It spreads.

Like a contagious disease that spreads like an epidemic.

Or, to use a more positive metaphor, like a joyful and enthusiastic person whose joy is simply contagious, who will spread their enthusiasm on to everyone around them.

Fire does not spread because someone has told it to spread: Go, spread!

Fire cannot do anything else but spread.

When the fire of the Holy Spirit burns in you, you cannot do anything else but spread it.

Or vice versa: If nothing is spreading, there is

obviously no fire burning.

If you have a candle with a burning flame, you put it up on a candlestick so it will brighten up the whole room, and so that others can light their candles.

You would not think of locking up a candle in a closet. Obviously, if you were to do that, the fire might spread and light the whole closet.

More likely though, the flame would be extinguished. Fire needs oxygen to stay alive. Without oxygen, the flame dies.

Some Christians keep their faith sort of locked up in a closet, like if you were to keep a candle locked up in a closet. My faith is my private business, and anyway, religion and politics are those things you don't talk about in public, aren't they?

Remember what Jesus said though: You wouldn't think of lighting a lamp and putting it under a bowl, or under a bushel, as good old King James

has it. Of course not. You would put it up on a stand so it can light the whole house!

This has become proverbial in English as well as in German: Someone who hides their light under a bushel is someone who hides their talents and is inappropriately modest about their abilities.

However, this is really not about talents and abilities. This is about spreading the fire of God's love. We who follow Jesus are supposed to lighten up the world with our light and spread the fire of God's love.

Is your faith burning within you? Or is it suffering from a lack of oxygen?

Did you put your candle into the closet or under a bushel, without access to fresh air, without exposing it to the breath of God's Holy Spirit?

Boy and girl scouts and owners of a barbecue grill know this as a fact: A fire needs air, it needs oxygen to get it going. You need to blow on it or use bellows. A tiny flame needs being breathed

on in order to keep it alive and to make it grow.

Our faith needs being breathed on by God's Spirit.

In the Hebrew language, this is all the same word: spirit, breath, wind. Ruach. God's spirit over the waters of creation. God's breath over the waters of creation.

Our faith needs this oxygen to get it going, to keep it alive. We need God's spirit, God's breath, to blow into our faith in order to make it grow and spread. We need the oxygen and the fresh air of worshipping together, of reading the bible, of experiencing holy communion.

The disciples got going. Filled with the Holy Spirit. No university classes for them, no exams required.

Now I hear some people say: Let's go! We've just got to get things going and start activities, in our congregations, let the Spirit move us. Yeah, we want to feel the Holy Spirit blowing from our

pulpits, we want to hear spontaneous and inspired sermons, not stiff and formal theological language.

Well, absolutely, we can only agree: We certainly don't want stiffness and formality, and we sure want preachers to be inspired by the Holy Spirit.

But is that really what this is about? Let's just get going, let's get moving, let's just start a bunch of activities? Is that what the disciples did?

Let's not misunderstand: The disciples may not have had a university degree. But they sure had a long and intensive practical and theoretical training with Jesus. They had lived with him, they had years of experience with him.

And when he was no longer visibly with them, they did not just fall into some kind of activism but rather went into a kind of retreat, they withdrew from the public, they prayed, they took some time out for quiet preparation.

We also – like the disciples - need that time of

retreat. That time out. Time to live with Jesus and make our experiences with him. Time for that practical and theoretical training. Time for quiet preparation and prayer.

However, we cannot stay there.

We cannot stay in that back room where it's so nice and cosy and comfy and safe. We cannot stay in that retreat phase forever.

The disciples got going. After this time out, this time of retreat, they got moving.

They started telling people about what they had experienced with Jesus. They went up to people, they opened up their mouths without fear of what others might think or say. They started spreading the fire of God's love. Their faith was contagious. It spread like a burning fire.

What's keeping us from being contagious, from spreading the fire of God's love?

Do you maybe feel you haven't made any

experiences with Jesus, so there's nothing for you to tell?

If that is the case, I'd like to encourage you: Start making experiences with him! Get started with your practical training. Include him in your everyday life and in your decisions.

Make it a habit to talk to him (that's what we call praying). And start listening to what he wants to tell you (that's what we do when we read the Bible or come together for service).

Spend time with him! An hour on Sunday morning isn't bad for starters.

What's keeping us from being contagious, from spreading the fire of God's love?

Are you a bit shy of other people maybe? Do you feel you are sitting in your safe and comfy back room and would rather not venture out?

There's a solution for that: Ask Jesus for his Holy Spirit!

The disciples needed it, we need it. The disciples

were just as afraid as we are to venture out of their safe haven. And Jesus has promised to give us his Holy Spirit.

What's keeping us from being contagious, from spreading the fire of God's love?

Are you maybe saying like some of the prophets: I can't do that. I am way too young (or, alternatively: too old).

I can't talk in front of people (like Moses).

And anyway, isn't my faith my private issue?

Well, no. Christian faith is no back room faith. It's a contagious faith that needs to spread. If you lock it up in a closet, the flame will die.

What's keeping us from being contagious, from spreading the fire of God's love?

Possibly, we have never learned to speak the language of faith.

We all know what it is like to learn a new language. Many of us have learned at least one foreign language. We know how difficult that can be. We have had to learn our vocabulary and study our grammar.

But then, all these difficulties are forgotten when we make our first steps, when we start talking to people, and we find that it works!

I may still be clumsy and awkward in this new language, but people understand me! I may not be able to lead a profound conversation yet, but I can order a cup of coffee.

It's the same thing with the language of faith. The Holy Spirit inspires us and gives us the courage to venture out of our back room. But we'll have to study our vocabulary, and we'll have to do the practicing ourselves.

The language of faith is a language we need to learn and practice just like any other language. This language certainly should not sound artificial or phony or kitschy.

However, we should not overdo it with our concern about that. We should be much more concerned about remaining speechless and silent and not learning and practicing this new language.

What's keeping us from being contagious, from spreading the fire of God's love?

Nothing, really!

If we have been set ablaze by the fire of the Holy Spirit, we will start spreading the fire of God's love. It's not a matter of "can I" or "do I want to". It's simply the nature of fire to spread, and it will be our nature to spread God's love.

So let's just do it. Let's just get the fire of Pentecost out there to people.

Let's just tell them what we have experienced with Jesus. Let's be contagious with the good news and spread God's fire.

Amen.