

"WHERE'S THE FIRE?"

June 3, 1990

TEXT: Acts 2:3 "And there appeared to them tongues as of fire, distributed and resting on each one of them."

The other day I read a story about a church that caught fire. Literally caught on fire. And when the Volunteer Fire Department arrived, one of the firemen was the village skeptic. Hoping to nudge his conscience a bit, the pastor said to him, "You know, Joe, this is the first time that I've ever seen you in church." To which the skeptic replied, "Pastor, this is the first time the church has ever been on fire."

I wonder how many others ignore the church for that same reason. Jesus clearly taught that the church should be a powerful and exciting force in the world. He said of the church (by which of course I mean the people and not the building) "You are the salt of the earth!" What he meant by that seems pretty obvious. Salt adds spice to life. It purifies everything it touches. And, one might add, in our part of the world it is also useful for melting snow and ice.

Surely it is not too much to suppose that Jesus intended the church to do the same. To add zest and spice to an otherwise dull and commonplace world, to purify that which it touched, and to melt frozen attitudes and icy hearts. To free us from the way things have always been, and to show us the joy and the wonder of the new life to which God calls us.

Too often, however, the church has done just the opposite. We have been the instruments of blandness, not of zest. And we have added one more frosty layer of indifference to strengthen the icy grip of the status quo. Too often we have heard Jesus' warning about the salt that has lost its savor, without recognizing that he just might have been talking about us.

But, on this day of Pentecost, I would like to read those words again. I hope you will hear them, not as something directed primarily at others, nor as something vague aimed at the church in general. I hope you will hear them as Christ's loving warning to First Congregational Church and to us, its members. "If salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trodden under foot."

Or turn, if you will, to the book of Revelation and hear what the Spirit says, not just to some innocuously distant and comfortably anonymous church in Laodicea, but to the people

of God right here in Wauwatosa. "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches . . . I know your works: you are neither cold nor hot. Would that you were either cold or hot! So because you are lukewarm . . . I will spew you out of my mouth." (Rev. 3:13-16)

Notice the difference between God's point of view and our own. We think it enough just to stay out of trouble. We think it enough that we are nice, respectable people. We pat ourselves on the back, not unlike the Pharisees of Jesus' day, because we are not murderers, or thieves, or adulterers. But in God's eyes we may not appear so noble --perhaps not even really good. Perhaps as God sees us the words "dull" and "boring" might be more appropriate. "Would that you were either cold or hot. But because you are lukewarm . . . I will spew you out of my mouth."

Now that is pretty strong language. It almost sounds as though God prefers "interesting" sinners to the dull, bland, Christians who make up so many of our churches. Not because God approves of sin, but because He is bored by zestless Christians. And so, it would seem, are many of our friends and neighbors. Perhaps that is why only a little more than half of all Americans belong to a church or synagogue, why three out of four church members find something other than church to take up their Sunday mornings. Like the skeptic in my opening story, perhaps they do not come to church because the church is not on fire.

Do not get me wrong. I am not talking about gimmicks or avante garde worship. You do not set a church on fire by rubbing two parishioners together. You can sometimes generate quite a bit of heat that way, but it is not very often the kind of fire the Bible speaks about. The fire which characterized the First Church of Jerusalem did not come from gimmicks. It came from God.

One of the best descriptions of worship which I have ever seen is found in the 18th chapter of I Kings, the famous account of Elijah's contest with the priests of Ba'al. Perhaps you remember how Elijah and the priest of Ba'al killed bulls and laid them on firewood for a sacrifice, but they put no fire to them. The Ba'al worshipers called upon their gods, but nothing happened. Then Elijah called upon the Lord. And "the fire of the Lord fell and consumed the burnt offering and the wood and the stones and the dust and licked up the water that was in the trench. And when all the people saw it, they fell on their faces, and they said, 'The Lord, He is God; the Lord, He is God.'" In the closing words of our opening hymn this morning: "My heart an altar, and Thy love the flame."

That is the fire the church needs today. Not gimmicks. Not multimedia razz-matazz. Not preachers stomping up and down, shouting and screaming, but the fire of Pentecost. The fire of which Jesus spoke when he said, "I came to cast a fire on earth, and would that it were already kindled." A fire that burns with zeal for the poor and the needy; a fire that consumes social and

economic injustice; a fire that warms the hearts of men and women, both in and out of the church, filling their emptiness and giving them power to be children of God.

Without that fire, there was no church in Jerusalem. Just a frightened band of weak men and women, hiding from the authorities and cringing every time there was a knock on the door. But when that fire touched them, they became a force which turned the whole world upside down.

Without that fire there can be no church here either. Just a bunch of nice, pleasant people who are too often neither cold nor hot. But with the fire of God, we could be anything God wants us to be.

I am told that the Salvation Army has a chapel on the very spot where General William Booth was first moved by God. And one day one of their officers knelt before the altar there and was heard to pray, "Do it again, Lord! Do it again!"

The choice is ours. We can come to the table of communion like nice, conventional people about to engage in a nice, conventional ceremony. Or we can come like tinder waiting to be set ablaze, offering ourselves to be Christ's church in fact as well as in name. God does not force Himself upon us, but, with our permission and co-operation, He can kindle His fire in us today. "Do it again, Lord! Do it again!"