

Fire

A Ladies Lunch devotional by Sue Holbrook, First Methodist Church, May 2023

Last week, we talked about the things God gave us for our existence here on his earth. When we think about the things of nature, all can be seen to be necessary. And all, when used in the wrong way or to the extreme can inflict catastrophe that might be life threatening. We absolutely must have water...but then there are floods. Wind can quickly go from refreshing cool breeze to a terrifying tornado. What about fire?

December 8, 1966...for my family, the date is burned into our memories. It was the height of the Christmas season when gift fruit retailers are swamped with orders. It had been a hugely busy day. My parents had closed up by 6:00 and headed home for supper and rest. By 7:00 the call came that the whole place was engulfed in flames. My father passed the fire truck getting there. There was nothing to do but watch it burn. That's just how fast fire can take over. And yet, as God has shown himself to his people down through time, he has come in the fire.

AW Tozer tells us that only the visibility of the fire can give us a remote conception of God's power in all things. He appeared to Moses in the burning bush. He stayed in the pillar of fire through the Israelites wilderness journey. The fire that glowed between the wings of the cherubim in the holy place was called Shekinah, the Presence. And He came at Pentecost as a fiery flame and rested upon each disciple.

Other writers and theologians have written about the intellectual love of God. I'm sure there are libraries full of books that take that point of view. But Tozer tells us that the highest love of God is not intellectual, but spiritual. God is spirit and only the spirit of a person can really know him. In the deep spirit of a person the fire must glow or it is not the true love of God. The great of the kingdom, he says, are those who loved God more than others did.

Have you ever been in a church where the pastor who came to serve...while he looked good on paper and made a good first impression...just did not have the fire? And I don't mean ranting raving beat the pulpit and scream kind of fire. But the fire that comes from deep within a soul whose heart knows the Lord. This is the seeking heart to whom God has revealed himself and set the soul on fire with burning adoration. This is the kind of soul fire that burns so intensely that it consumes the spirit of the person. It comes through in our poetry and hymn lyrics. In the 1800s, William Booth said it this way: Send the fire, send the fire, O Lord, to magnify your name, to never be the same, we need your holy flame...send the fire! More recently, Graham Kendrick echoed the refrain in his contemporary anthem:

Shine Jesus shine, fill this land with the Father's glory; blaze spirit, blaze, set our hearts on fire!

And here's the thing I've been coming to...there is a worship that can never come from doctrinal knowledge of God. Hearts that are breaking with love are those who have been in the presence and have looked with opened eye on the majesty of Deity. They have a quality about them that is not known or understood by common people. Having been in the presence of God they report what they saw there. And here we come to a big difference in who and what we listen to and read. Tozer says there are two kinds of leaders: scribes and prophets. The scribe tells us what he has read. The prophet tells us what he has seen. When I read this, it clarified some things in my life that I have had a hard time understanding. Maybe you've had some of these same confusions.

I mentioned being in a church where the pastor was a scribe. Not in this church, but another church where we spent too many years. We were led by a man who told the committee in the very beginning that he was a pulpiteer and this was his chosen profession and he assured them he was good at it. And on that level, he was. But if you've been in the church for any length of time, you know that is about as wrong as you can get. For Ed and me, it took us awhile. In our defense, we were young. And we had made many friends there, who remain our friends today. How sad for so many of us to have been blinded by our faithfulness to a church. Tozer says:

The distinction is not an imaginary one. Between the scribe who has read and the prophet who has seen there is a difference as wide as the sea. We are overrun today with orthodox scribes, but the prophets, where are they? The hard voice of the scribe sounds over evangelicalism, but the church waits for the tender voice of the saint who has penetrated the veil and has gazed with inward eye upon the wonder that is God. And yet, thus to penetrate, to push in sensitive living experience into the holy Presence, is a privilege open to every child of God.

We have a pastor who is a prophet in this sense. Every Sunday, Jeremy ushers us into the presence of Jesus and he can go there because he knows the way so well. He feels the fire and he wants us to feel it too. So we have to ask ourselves...have we heard God say "Take off your shoes...this is holy ground." Do we look for his leadership in the pillar of fire he has given us...his Word...which we can turn to anytime, day or night. He is in the water...he is in the wind...and he is in the fire...the holy spirit fire.

May we always seek to follow the fire. Amen.

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