

To Tend a Fire
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Every year, around this time---just after Pentecost---

My mind gets stuck on fire.

Now, I'm not talking about worrying about *wildfires*,

(as much as that comes into play for all of us up here, too...)

...But those *controlled* fires... those purposely created fires,

that we build on top of the dirt to keep us warm,

knowing our synthetic tents---our manmade shelters---just won't do the job.

---Those fires we build between stones to cook our food,

when we're away from all of the electrical, mechanical stuff,

and sleeping outside, under the stars and between the trees.

...Those fires we build for light, in a space away

from streetlights, and lamps, and florescent bulbs.

...I'm talking about that *dependable* fire,

that's a source of life and a friend to anyone and everyone seeing to their most basic needs.

I become sort of obsessed with it, actually...

...because to me, it's the center of all things while I'm out there.

I love the challenge of getting it going---

---I think I told you guys about how we got that fire started

in the middle of the pouring rain, last year, up near Taylor

(Thanks to Ron teaching me some awesome survival strategies!)---

Felt amazing.

....And I always like to be the one, when we go---

---no matter how many people or guys we have with us---

--to get it going, and keep it going.

So, you can imagine, I was kind of selfishly bummed last year when we couldn't have them,

as a result of the bans, and all of those bad fires burning out of control through the state.

Felt like there was no purpose to camping without one,

Because to me, that's the center of all things

when you're sleeping out, bare, on fresh earth.

...That fire.... Keeping it. Tending it.

Being out there, away from the concrete suffocating the dirt,

To me, is all about searching for all of the pieces to build it just right...

... in different layers of combustible stuff.

First starting with the wispy tinder, letting just enough air in to let the material breathe....

Then, from there, finding all of the mid-level kindling.

Setting up the twigs, then over those, the sticks, then over those, the branches,

And above all, those sturdier logs you know the fire will eventually reach

after traveling through all of those smaller things, to create a roaring flame...

... that raging hot flame that sustains you through the night.

And after all of that happens, I pace.

Almost endlessly, actually.

---Not the stressed out kind of pace, but that watchful, engaged, caring kind of stroll,

That only happens when you're fully committed to the cause.

...Making those circles around the burning wood,

looking at each piece, and gauging when it's burned through enough to be turned,

And watching for the need to add new wood so the heat doesn't fade to smoke, then ash.

When we've gone out there, there's always those people who don't care so much,

and wonder why you keep putting in all of the time.

There are some people who are content to just sit, and watch, and let it burn,

...not noticing the fire until it's gone,

and they're standing there cold, in the near dark.

I sometimes get from those folks—

---especially from the male campers---the whole,

“why don't you just let it go, for a while?”

And of course, I'll enjoy the down time while it's going,

but as soon as I see a need, I'm right back up on my feet...

Because a fire needs tending.

And as the one who set it up to burn, you become the keeper of that flame.

As the one who loves that fire, and started that fire---
 --you need to nurture it, or it just goes away.

Last Sunday, on Pentecost, we talked about this holy fire that spreads between us.

That fire of our passion for God, inside of us, that the disciples shared,
 and spread that day they stood in front of the crowd,

Relying on God to lead the way,

to help people understand, and to bring the church to life.

That fire of our passion for God that *we* feel inside of *us*...

Deep in our hearts, that moves us to talk about God,

and about the ways we feel God breathe into our own life...

And that spreading of the heat of God's love that passes between us, as a result,

and moves through each life on this earth—one person, to the next, to the next---

---as we touch others with that flame inside of us, as we go.

That was one of the most powerful meanings of Pentecost, ...

... but it doesn't stop there, does it?

It doesn't stop with feeling that fire, and getting it going.

It doesn't stop with the fact that it's there at all, actually...

---The flame that rises through our hearts... it's not just there, and then. Plll. That's it.

No. In these days just after Pentecost---that day that started this holy fire in the world---

It's important for us to think about the ways the fire in our souls---

---just like those campfires we set up outside our tents, through all of the summer nights--
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Needs to be looked after. Watched. Loved. ...Cared for, always.

Our experience of God, just like the flames of a natural fire, requires some tending.

Or... just like with any other burning we rely on for warmth, that passion—that heat—

When we neglect it—when we leave it alone for too long---

---we one day notice we're standing in the dark.

Feeling colder. Having a hard time seeing past ourselves.

...Not realizing before it's gone, that the fire

that once roared so deep in our soul has burned out---

---turned to smoke and ash, only marking what once was there.

And there really are no exceptions, I can think of, between us.

...Pastors, parishioners, individual spiritual seekers...

I think we've all stood there, in the cold dark, from time to time.

We just get so caught up in stuff, ya know? Our lives, they're so busy.

These gusts of wind in our minds pick us up, and lift us away from the deep parts inside,

leaving us just sort of floating in the middle of all of the debris that clutters up the hours.

---We get stuck out here [eyes], and leave what's in here, [heart]

Alone too long, sometimes.

In all of the busy-ness of life, we *forget* about God...

The very source of the life within us.

And we don't do it on purpose, of course. It just happens.

So often, before we even notice that flame's going out.

We stop praying---we stop talking to God, while we're moving around.

We lose those moments we used to pause and breathe deep,

and look at Life in wonder,

And just connect with It for a second, thanking All That Is,

for what we hold in our eyes and arms.

And we stop talking about what's inside of us with others,

because we haven't even felt it, ourselves, for so long...

And then----*poof*---smoke and ash.

That holy fire growing inside of us and spreading between us dwindles out.

And of course---just like when this happens while

we're out on the dirt, between the trees,

While we're walking on God's earth, we can start that fire again.

It's harder though... because we're cold,

and it's dark in our lives after those flames go away...

... but it can definitely be done.

Any avid camper, though, knows that when it comes to that fire, it's just better---

---it's just easier---it's just more comfortable--to *tend*.

Alright. So how do we do this?

...How do you tend the fire of Your love of God, in your soul?

In these days after Pentecost, it's good for us to ask ourselves,

How it is that we keep our experience of God active,

and real, and close, and warm in our lives?

We each do it differently, I think.

--Probably different versions of the *same* active love—

--but it's unique to you, to me, and to anyone else we see,

Because each of our relationships with God is one of a kind,

As we are each made one of a kind, ourselves, in God's soul.

...But I think, that no matter how we each do it in our own way...

This tending we do to keep the fire of God alive and burning in our hearts,

happens moment by moment, action by action, word by word.

It can be through the conversations we have with God—through prayer;

Through the ways we are with people—

--what we share, what we *give*, through word or deed.

Through the ways we are with the environment we live in---

---how we help the healthy stuff grow,

and do our best to keep the bad stuff from thriving.

It can be through setting aside time during the day or night for spiritual exploration---
---reading sacred texts, or interesting philosophies
that open our minds wider than they were.

It can be through making sure to get outside and hike up those hills,
so your eyes and heart can be filled with the glory of God all around you...

...But however we each do it, this tending requires the constant care of our heart,

...And then one follows the other,

Because when we care deep down about something, it stays in our thoughts.

It's the shadow of all of our movements.

It's something we look at again and again.

It's something we pace around—in the good way---

---strolling to examine the pieces of our lives,

And striving to keep that burning alive through each part.

...Because we know, that this holy fire of our love for God,

and experience of God, in our hearts,

keeps us warm in a way that no manmade shelter we've built around our lives can match.

...Because we know these synthetic things that surround us just won't do the job.

We keep our eyes and mind on that fire,

because we understand it gives us the vital sustenance we need to continue on,

while we spend our time on this earth, under the stars and between the trees.

We tend that holy fire in our hearts, because it shines a light in our lives
that helps us to better see and understand the world around us,
And allows us to take each step with more confidence
and surety about where we're going.

We keep our constant care with the fire
that is our experience of God's love and company in our souls,
Because we know it's a *dependable* fire.

...Because we know that God is the source of our life,
and a friend to anyone and everyone living day by day,
Seeing to our most basic needs.

That wisdom of life, we read about earlier from Proverbs,
and that Spirit of Truth we read about in John,
Tells us these things.

It tells us to keep our eyes on our relationship with God—
---the fire of God within us---and to watch it in constant care,
Being careful not to walk away from what's been built...

...or it will either die, or maybe even grow dangerously out of hand.

It tells us to always maintain the shape of it, rotating the burning sides in and out,
to keep the flame and heat inside of us in balance and in a continual burn...

...Not letting any piece burn too long without letting it breathe...

And it tells us to always be adding *new* substance to that heat, too,

so what started it all doesn't eventually just smolder down to cold ash.

So in these days after Pentecost—

---that hour the disciples first sparked that flame of passion within us, all of those years ago---

---as God's holy fire burns inside of us,

and spreads through the souls we touch with our own,

Let's keep our eye on it.

Let's let it get stuck in our minds....knowing what it takes to tend a fire.

...Let's gladly walk circles around it, and live each hour doing whatever we can

to let it continue to warm our lives with God's holy love.

Amen.