

Fire, Smoke, and Mirrors
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So who are these Christians?

What are they doing? What exactly are they trying to say?

These questions have been asked by people

with furrowed brows and crunched mouths for a long time.

They were asked definitely in the weeks

following the start of the Christian movement---the start of the church---on Pentecost.

And they're still asked today.

People still narrow their eyes, still shake their heads,

still look at Christians like they're crazy.

Just like they did in Jesus' day,

and in the days the disciples worked to spread word of what they'd seen and heard,

...I think we **still** see the same expressions of either disapproval, or curiosity,

in the faces around us, when the fact of being a Christian pops up in conversation,

Or in circumstance.

Someone sees you with a bible,

or hears you talking about what you did at church on Sunday,

---And all of the sudden, it's there. That *look*.

...Right? You all know it.

And then whoever you're with either becomes engaged---

---asking real questions, with real interest---

... Or they fall away. Detach. Grumble.

Those disapproving words change,

but they're a lot of times just variations of the same...

.... 'Just a lot of smoke and mirrors, that stuff. Nothing really there. It's an illusion.'

At worst, a delusion, right?

And, of course both reactions are just as legit.

The last one, sadly legit, because a lot of Christians have done a lot of weird things.

A lot of *bad* things, in the name of Christianity,

Making it all look like a façade.

Using the word "God," and the name Jesus for their *own* purposes,

outside of what they were meant for.

...And all of that brings us to a question of substance.

What is the substance of our spirit?

What's the substance of our faith?

What makes us burn?

And what kind of *warmth* do we bring to world with this fire we feel and tend inside?

On Pentecost, we talked about God's holy fire in the world,

and how we spread it from heart to heart, mind to mind, soul to soul, each day we live.

Last week, we talked about our need to *tend* that fire in our souls.

Our need to be sure we keep in contact with God---

---stay in touch with God---and with each other through the hours,
so that all that warmth and light built up in our souls for knowing God,
doesn't one day unexpectedly and accidentally go out,
leaving us in the cold and dark, as a result of neglecting
that spiritual connection with Life, for too long.

Now, like I was saying before, through these weeks after Pentecost---

---these days that I can really feel summer coming---

The thought of this fire burns long in my own mind.

So we're touching on it again, as the third part in this sermon series, for Pentecost.

Today, we're going to talk not so much about spreading the fire, or tending the fire,
but about what exactly it is that makes up
the fire of our love of God that burns in our hearts.

What are the smaller pieces of our lives that set our souls to burn for God?

And then a little past that, what is it, that makes you, that makes me,

that makes *anyone* who goes to church on Sunday,

a Christian in their heart the rest of the days of the week.

We're going to talk about the *substance* of our faith.

What it is that creates a flame inside of us,

And about what all of those smaller burning pieces eventually bring to the world...

... to our experiences together, as we stand around with each other over the dirt.

Last weekend, Ky and I went over to Lost Creek---our favorite spot---
---for our first night of camping, this year.

It was just after that sermon about tending the fire,

so I wound up paying even closer attention, I think, this time,

To that whole process of setting the campfire up to burn.

And, as I was walking around, kneeling, and pulling, and piling,

...gathering up all of these different little pieces of kindling...

...being a minister, I couldn't help but think about Jesus a little bit, while I was doing it.

What he said about the seeds.

You remember that?

The ones that fell on the path and were either kicked away, or eaten up by the birds.

The ones that fell on the rock and sprouted up, but quickly withered away,

because there was no moisture.

The ones that fell into thorns, and the thorns grew with them, and choked them.

And then those ones that fell into good soil, and grew, and blossomed,

and yielded a hundred fold.

That parable he used, spoke of that *substance* of faith, I mentioned before.

What it is inside of us, that helps our spiritual connection grow stronger,

And those things that take away from what we've got with God,

and makes us become more distant, and separate from God, and the Life around us.

And I realized that this same truth applied to these holy fires we've built up inside.

What are the little pieces of our lives that have come together

to bring a flame and light to our souls?

See, there's good stuff, and bad stuff to place in a pile to start a good fire.

You don't want to use anything too new, too fresh... otherwise it will be too wet to catch.

You don't want to use anything too big, right off the bat,

otherwise the substance is too thick to hold the flame.

You also don't want to use anything too thin, or it burns away too fast,

to catch onto anything bigger we've piled above.

...On what do we base our faith?

...Our belief in God? ...Our love for God?

What is it, at the bottom of it all, that comes into place inside of us,

to catch and burn into the passion that makes us gladly call ourselves Christians?

If the substance of our convictions---if the heart of our connection to God---

---comes from a knee jerk reaction to something too new, too foreign,

too fresh for us to fully understand,

That fire has a real hard time catching, and sustaining, inside, doesn't it?

If we become overzealous---overly excited---when we first meet God,

and jump into our beliefs too fast, with large claims and large tasks...

...too big for us to really grasp or do well with, so early in our faith,

That fire inside has very little chance to burn into something warm and roaring.

... If the heart of our pursuit of God is based on anything too thin, or flimsy,
Well, that's not great either... because that thin and flimsy stuff just burns away.

At first there's a sizeable flame as it all combusts in a bundle,

And you get so excited, thinking you've really got something going...

---something that will work---there, in front of you...

...but very quickly you find that you were wrong,

as that flame that was, for a moment, so big---

---just like that seed sprouting in rock---

---withers away to nothing almost as quickly as it first grew.

I've seen it happen a lot, through the years since I first became a Christian.

--in my own mind and heart, outside of just being raised in it.

Friends and relatives, who just jump in too quick.

--Using the fresh stuff for the fire.

Hearing an idea new to them, they immediately grasp onto it,

and pile it into the base of their faith.

And they start talking about these ideas of heaven and hell and salvation, with other people.

Proselytizing the best they can, any chance they get...

... then they're faced with those *looks* we were talking about before.

Those doubts. Those statements about it all being smoke and mirrors---an illusion---

---And they find they can't respond to them.

They can't enter into any kind of healthy dialogue,

Because those ideas were just too fresh---too undeveloped--- in their own minds to fully grasp them,

or have their own interpretations of them,

And they're faith... that flame inside... just goes away,

under the burden of the doubts brought to their own minds by others...

In another situation, very sad for me to think of...

...I remember when my older brother got real caught up in religion for a while.

Christianity, specifically.

So fast. He drastically piled on the big stuff.

Made *huge* changes to his life.

This group that he was with, (it's actually classified as a "cult" now, in modern religious studies)---they made big claims.

And he grabbed at them all, and placed them in the center of his heart....

...so early in the building of the fire of his faith.

This group told him to break up with his girlfriend of five years, who he'd actually planned to marry,

Because they'd been intimate before their vows.

And he did it.

They told him he was a prophet. And he believed it.

He started taking on huge tasks in his faith, at the church.

Stuff too big for him to add to the fire, that heat below, being so new.

It was too much, too soon, and that flame that was so hot, never caught into the next layer.

It went out, inside of him...

...all of it leaving him in the cold and dark, deeply disillusioned.

And without any of that light inside of him, for him to see more clearly,

He lost sight of God.

He's now one of the staunchest atheists I know.

And with others... I've seen this dwindling...

...this extinguishing happen again and again, too,

Most often, out of the rest, actually...

When what they based their belief on, was just too thin... too flimsy.

I've met some, who had a single experience that they felt

somehow proved the existence of God.

Usually things going *well* in their lives when they didn't expect it.

A promotion. A new relationship.

Healing, or becoming well, after being injured, or sick.

...And though that feeling starts a bright burning flame inside---

---though those singular moments caused their heart to roar with the flame, for just a moment---

It goes away almost as quickly as it came,

Once that experience (like all of our experiences)

fade in their minds as the moments continue on.

What is the substance of our faith?

What is it at the bottom of it all,

that ignites that flame of our passion for God in our souls, and keeps it burning long,
Into a sustainable fire to warm and bring light to our lives?

It's something to pay attention to---to ask ourselves----as Christians.

As people who live to *keep* that flame, and spread that holy fire through the world,

So that *others* can feel the warmth of God's love in their own lives,

the way we've been so blessed to feel it in our own.

So that others, can see the Life around them with the light of God, leading the way,

as we've been blessed to see through the darkness

that sometimes surrounds our own lives.

So that when we see the furrowing brows, and hear the grumbling of skeptical words,

We have enough fire in our hearts to touch into theirs,

and ignite those smaller pieces to burn in their souls,

As they see and feel the warmth of God's love for the first time, themselves.

So that they, for the first time, can see that the presence and company of God in our lives

Is far from the tricks of smoke and mirrors...

...far from an illusion...

And one of the most real, and life sustaining things

they'll ever feel as they breathe each day,

Blessed to be alive in this world God created all around us.

In these days between this Sunday and next, let's let this question fill our souls.

Let's let it come into our minds, and stay there for a while,

As we think about our own faith in God. Our own relationship with God.

Our own *friendship* with God.

And what brought that warmth up inside of *us*, to roar, and stay.

And what keeps it alive each day we gladly call ourselves followers of Christ,

And companions of God.

Next week, we'll pick up from here, concluding this series on God's holy fire.

We'll talk about that *good* substance---

---That sturdy substance that first catches fire, than catches into something bigger,

and bigger after that, to make something that lasts in our souls.

But for now, in these holy days after Pentecost,

let's look deep into the substance of our own passion for God,

as we tend to that burning inside...

...and as God's living disciples in the world,

share that flame with the spirit of life in others,

still standing away from its heat,

hoping to find something to burn inside, and warm their lives, too.

Amen.

