

Sermons from Park Hill: May 11, 2008

**Sermons from
Park Hill Congregational UCC
Denver, Colorado**

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**Acts 2: 1-21
“Don’t Be Afraid of Fire”**

One of my favorite TV shows is coming to an end in a just a few weeks – Survivor. A few years ago there was a season of Survivor All Stars – people who had all played the game before. So their 39 days were particularly harsh. When they were dropped off on their island paradise, they were not given anything. For instance, they had to figure out how to make a fire by rubbing sticks together, during the middle of the rainy season. It was days before they were successful. In the meantime, they discovered just how basic fire is to staying alive, to basic survival. They couldn’t drink the water without boiling it; they couldn’t keep warm during the rainy, cold nights; they could hardly eat. Try eating uncooked rice. They were desperate for fire.

Fire sustains life. And fire creates new life. Because, we know, fire destroys. Yet, witness new growth, green grass, small

trees, in the aftermath of a fire. On the farm we used to burn the ditches that had become clogged with weeds. I don’t think they do that much anymore for environmental and safety reasons, but I’ll never forget as a kid always being amazed at how the destructive force of fire enabled new life.

I thought of these images when reading the scripture text that is so vivid in its description of fire – cleansing and renewing, life-giving and life-sustaining. The birth of new hope for a community of believers burned by the disappointment of seeing their master killed. Fire that destroyed long-standing divisions and opened new understanding, a surprise that after centuries of not understanding one another because of language barriers, everyone understood in their own language.

There are some who say that they heard in one common language – a reversal of the story in Genesis about Tower of Babel, the story that explains that God gave us many languages to humble humans from thinking too highly of ourselves. Pentecost is therefore seen as the conclusion of the Babel story – the happy ending. But as I read the text from Acts, each group retains its identity and hears in their own unique and specific language. They don’t lose language; but they lose division based on it. Their language is not taken away; their understanding is increased.

This is important for a multi-cultural church or a nation as diverse as ours to hear. We do not become united by all becoming the same. Because too often, that means everyone is expected to become – or at least more highly value – whatever the majority is; the majority or those in power. There are certain expectations that unity comes from

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agreeing – to a set of ideals, values, to a set of characteristics – in order to be united. If you don't, be careful what you say.

For example, questioning the war makes you unpatriotic. Somehow those in power got people to believe that questioning authority makes them a bad American, against the American ideal. And you don't love it? Leave it. The fact that this country was founded on liberty from the tyranny of the throne is not one of our country's highest values any more. Shouldn't blind faith in our leaders be considered unpatriotic? At times, questioning may be tolerated, we create "free speech zones," but the expectation is that the *higher good* comes from the patriotism that is expressed as United We Stand. And, by extension, things would just be so much easier if we did.

You know, whenever the phrase 9/11 is uttered we're all supposed to become afraid; it's like imprinted on our collective DNA. We're supposed to become cattle falling into line. As we've learned in the last month, we're not supposed to question things like 9/11, why 9/11 may have happened. We're just supposed to be afraid; to be intimidated back into silence. We've been trained to react in horror and disgust to any consideration of a different point of view. One of Rev. Jeremiah Wright's "sins" was to expose that we are not all the same. Not only about 9/11. We're not supposed to – it's unpatriotic – to bring up Abu Graib, or who were the Katrina victims because we might "aid the enemy." We're not supposed to tell the secret that our government conducted experiments on African American men at Tuskegee that let them die of syphilis. We're not supposed to remember or bring up that we placed our own citizens in internment camps during World War II. Or that we gave American

Indians blankets covered with disease or broke treaties with the various tribes – over and over. Recalling this kind of history, expressing doubt in the benevolence of our history, is contrary to the "good of the country." Of course, only someone in power is going to lose from such truth.

The expression of a different point of view will bring the wrath of... Fox News down upon you. God we can handle. The media? And we all better fall into line or anyone or anything around us that we touch will be destroyed. We were supposed to learn a lesson from Rev. Wright to keep our opinions to ourselves. His ego may be one thing, we may be angry with him, but I think it's taught us something far more dangerous about our country. And again, for a nation founded on liberty, such sentiment is tragic, and contrary to what should be our highest ideals. The dissenting views, the shared experiences, that had been tucked away in Black Church pulpits or the barbershop have been exposed and the majority of Americans have acted shocked – because we're not supposed to believe that our nation is capable of injustice any longer based on race, or that there would be any more lingering doubt. Anyone who says differently isn't to be believed. They're just bitter. But, can we move forward into a *new* day without being real about today and yesterday?

We need some kind of Holy Spirit power to bring a cleansing fire, to destroy the notions that we would be better off if we all just got along. We don't do ourselves any favors by covering up what we don't want to hear or know – essentially, to give up who we are so we can all just get along, or rather, to tell others *they* need to give up who they are so we can all just get along. My problem isn't unity or finding common ground. It's the

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cost to those who are left behind to achieve what isn't ultimately true - *yet*.

This was painfully illustrated one day four years ago while I was attending classes in Washington, DC. A guest from Great Britain was visiting the seminary campus. For some reason he was allowed to speak to all of us while we were eating lunch. He was placed in such a way that to get up and leave would have been inappropriate, so we felt captive – not to mention we lost any free time during an 8 hour day of classes. In his speech he made reference to the just completed General Conference of the United Methodist Church. He basically said that the church kept wasting its time debating homosexuality. I would agree. However, his spin was that if people would stop clamoring for their rights, the church would solve such issues as war in Iraq, AIDS in Africa, and hunger in the U.S. So the reason we're still at war is because gays and lesbians want to be ordained – and they keep being pushy about it.

One of my classmates responded during the question and answer period about his essentially asking people to deny their personhood so we could all just get along. He didn't get it. So she followed up three times to help him understand. Finally he responded that his church in England was very diverse – people from all kinds of ethnic backgrounds, "but," he said, "it's like we're all the same." We had heard enough by that time to know that what he meant is that they all acted like him; and no one was disagreeable.

Have you ever heard the phrase, "I don't see you as a Black woman... or a Mexican man? I just see you as a person." That's a lovely sentiment, but, I'm told, it also feels like a statement that you really don't see me. In

some cases, it's real progress because it tries not to assign judgment about someone by just looking at them. But it also says, "Who I am is invisible to you. You don't really see me or understand that my experience is different." The assumption becomes, "Your experience, your life is just like mine." Perhaps some of that comes from embarrassment – that acknowledges I really don't know you; that I haven't really tried because I really haven't had to.

W.E.B. DuBois wrote in *The Souls of Black Folks* in 1903 about double consciousness. He meant that African Americans have to learn two cultures – their own and that of the majority. To be successful and accepted, speech and mannerisms and values in public had to accommodate the majority. At home or in church, such a guard could be let down, and the pulpit was a safe place to say exactly what couldn't be said anywhere else. Those in the majority may consider this odd because we don't generally have to think about what we say or where. And even if we do dissent, there may be less to lose if a cost is exacted.

People like Bill Moyers have been right on target that white and black preachers have been scrutinized very differently. Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell publically blamed gays and lesbians and abortionists and the ACLU for causing 9/11 – for bringing the wrath of God upon the nation. Similar things were said about Hurricane Katrina. God had lifted the veil of protection for being too liberal. But, they blamed "acceptable" scapegoats, and the majority of those listening were just fine that it was someone else, so most people didn't really mind their bigotry. I'm not supposed to mind that I'm blamed for 9/11 and for distracting the church from solving the war in Iraq and hunger in the U.S. But, to suggest that our

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government – which *has* allowed its citizens to die and be interned – might have some culpability...? Perhaps I shouldn't post this sermon on the internet.

Some sort of Holy Spirit fire needs to burn away our delusions of grandeur so some sort of healing and new growth can begin to take root. The fire of the Holy Spirit needs to burn away all the pretext, the assumptions, the blocked ears and hearts, the discouragements of not being visible, the disgust that those who demand their rights are the problem – not the discrimination itself.

We need the Spirit of Truth to open our eyes to really see one another. We need the Spirit of Wisdom to hear, to desire to hear, to go out of our way to hear one another's stories – but that doesn't result in comparative suffering, that really diminishes me: mine is just like yours.

We need the Spirit of Wholeness to cleanse our hearts of resentment at the insensitivity of those who do not try to understand, and our disappointment at those who try but just don't get it. We need the Holy Spirit, whose fire burns to purify and cleanse and make new – to unify us in such a way that we get to hear in our own language, from our own experience – that we don't have to become someone else. Like the Rabbi said at my installation. In heaven we won't be asked why we weren't more like Moses. We'll be asked why we weren't more like our true selves.

We might want to say that the folks in Jerusalem all had the same experience, but no two people could interpret it in the same way – each of them came there that day carrying with them the argument they had on the way, or the sadness of a death in the

family the day before, or with the elation of a new job or the fear of being laid off while they were away. Each person came to the city for the Feast of Weeks but each came with a different life story.

But then the Spirit opened new possibilities, new options, new directions. The flames renewed their passion, a reminder of the joy that had once been theirs. The Spirit had been poured out on them in fulfillment of the words of the prophet Joel: You shall see visions and dream dreams. And the fire of passion is often unleashed in our dreams for what can be – if no one is afraid to speak their mind, to share their story and their pain, to be seen for who they really are and not what someone assumes about them. A cleansing fire is what brings new life. Is it possible that having just been burned, a new day is close at hand?

Fire is basic to our survival. Fire sustains life. Fire renews. Come Holy Spirit! Inflammate our waiting hearts.