



TRINITY EPISCOPAL CHURCH

on the Branford Green

May you find Christ, Community and Compassion within these historic walls.

Tending the fires of faith

By The Rev. Sharon Gracen

October 16, 2011

It was beautiful up in Maine, the fall colors were everything they should be in October, crisp air, sun and moon sparkling on the water. It was refreshing and restorative – one day in particular. As Peter was working on a project with his brothers, Max and I had a day to ourselves, spent mostly reading and tending the fire. There was something that felt sacred about keeping the fire burning – that takes the right kind of kindling and logs appropriately arranged, a well vented chimney, and regularly stirring things up. If a fire is not tended, it will go out. It can be restarted from embers but even they will die if left alone too long.

As I sat there, intent in my fire-tending role, I became aware of a sense of having escaped time. It was daylight so I had no electric lights on. The only sounds outside of the crackling were seagulls and gentle lapping of water outside of the house. It was meditation with my eyes and my mind open and in that bit of eternity, the fire seemed to be saying, “pay attention to me, I’m telling you something”. Ah, the Holy Spirit unmasked. She’s a bit of a drama queen in my life, likes things like tornadoes and now apparently fire.

The church began with fire on the day of Pentecost two thousand years ago. The people who received that inspiration were filled with the same passion that Jesus had – a passion for building a world community in which the poor, and the weak, and the peacemakers are blessed, in which abundance, enough to feed 15,000 with some bread and a couple of fish turns economic models on their heads. Jesus’ passion was for a world in which selfishness is not glamorized, but self-sacrificing love is emulated and venerated. Jesus’ life, death and resurrection spoke of God’s passion for us – we are not a flash in the pan, a human blip gone in an instant, but we are eternal because of the Christ spirit that is in us. The fire of Pentecost created the church to save the world from itself.

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Paul the Apostle really got it and from the very beginning, he set out to build the fires of Christianity that could cleanse the world of its selfishness, greed and violence. He gathered groups of people, some were the logs, some were the kindling, his teaching about Christ was the spark. He set those fires going, stoked them up with leaders to continue the work, and tended them with his letters when he could not be with them. The first letter to the church in Thessalonica is the earliest one that we have and it is wonderful. We get a sense that the warmth of the fire was proving irresistible for the message of love and a new way of being was spreading, dramatically. He said to them that they had been chosen and he could see the work of the Holy Spirit in their work.

I think that my fire in Maine was a reminder to keep that fire burning. The Holy Spirit pulled one of her little tricks to further the point. I have been concerned for a long time that the message of true Christianity has been derailed; actually I think it was hijacked. The zeal for creating communities of radical equality like that in Thessalonica to serve as incubators for a new way of being was diverted within a fairly short time. Changing the world here and now was superseded by the message of salvation in the next world – Christianity was refocused to Heaven instead of heaven on earth. It became moralistic, often cruel and uncaring and it scared people with images of hell to keep them in the fold, “believe and act this way or else.”

What the Holy Spirit nudged me with was the New York Times from July 31st. As a part of closing up the house, the beds are always stripped, a layer of newspaper put over the mattresses and then pictures from the walls laid face down on them. As I brought one of the last framed prints in, right where I was to put it was a column by Nicholas Kristof entitled “Evangelicals Without Blowhards” – it caught my attention. It was really an obituary for the Rev. John Stott, a British scholar and Anglican priest, who was named one of the 100 most influential people by Time Magazine. If the evangelical movement had one leader, it would have been he. His over 50 books encourage Christians to emulate the life of Jesus, especially around the concerns of the poor and the destruction of the environment. For John Stott, Christianity meant confronting injustice. Here is a particularly strong bit of his writing;

“Our Christian habit is to bewail the world's deteriorating standards with an air of self-righteous dismay. We criticize its violence, dishonesty, immorality, disregard for human life, and materialistic greed. “The world is going down the drain,” we say with a shrug. But whose fault is it? Who is to blame? Let me put it like this. If the house is dark when night fall comes, there is no sense in blaming the house, for that is what happens when the sun goes down. The question to ask is “Where is the light?” If the meat goes bad and becomes inedible, there is no sense in blaming the meat, for that is what happens when

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bacteria are left alone to breed. The question to ask is "Where is the salt?" Just so, if society deteriorates and its standards decline, till it becomes like a dark night or stinking fish, there is no sense in blaming society, for that is what happens when fallen men and women are left to themselves, and when human selfishness is unchecked.. The question to ask is "Where is the church? Why are the salt and light of Jesus Christ not permeating and changing our society?" It is sheer hypocrisy on our part to raise our eyebrows, shrug our shoulders or wring our hands. The Lord Jesus told *us* to be the world's salt and light. If therefore darkness and rottenness abound, it is our fault and we must accept the blame." (*Issues facing Christians Today*, p.67)

That's tending the fire with a blow-torch! I'm embarrassed to say that I have never heard of him before. His gentle voice has been drowned out by angry, hypocritical, moralizing televangelists that columnist Nick Kristoff observes makes money off of Jesus rather than follow him. And many people think that they represent Christianity. We have got to tend our fire better than that. The Apostle Paul lifted up the Christians in Thessalonica for having been such a powerful example of Christ's love in the world that others were beginning to emulate them. Nick Kristoff, a self-described, "not particularly religious person" had this to say, "In reporting on poverty, disease and oppression, I've seen that Evangelicals are disproportionately likely to donate 10% of their income to charities...More important, go to the front lines at home or abroad in the battles against hunger, malaria, rape, human trafficking or genocide and some of the bravest people you meet are evangelical Christians...who truly live their faith."

Tending the fires of our faith takes selflessness, a willingness to put others needs before your own. We have not been invited into the church by the Holy Spirit simply to have our own personal, private moments of grace. We have been truly called together to burn with a passion for the kingdom come on earth. Look around you; you are here for your brothers and sister in Christ, those around you in this church this morning. And you are here for those around us in the world that are hungry for good news and for hope for a better world and for some evidence that there are people willing to work for it in God's name. Let's not disappoint them.

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