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You may have grown up hearing this warning, and you may have even told your own children: don't play with fire. Most of us have been warned to not mess with fire, for terrible things can happen when handled in the wrong way.

Although fire is dangerous, just imagine what life would be like without fire. What are some of the things you might miss the most if we had not discovered the ability to harness and somewhat control fire? ...

Fire offers us a better life, mixed with a bit of danger. That might be why we come to Pentecost Sunday with a mixture of excitement and uncertainty, for the story contains a Spirit of fire that could inspire us, or it could burn us.

I imagine the disciples of Jesus felt a mixture of excitement and uncertainty as they experienced the presence of the Spirit while waiting in a room during the Jewish harvest festival known as Pentecost. The prefix *pente* means 50, which in the Jewish tradition referred to the fact that this festival followed the Passover festival 50 days later. Jews

were celebrating during Pentecost the wheat harvest and the gift of the Torah, God's teachings. We Christians celebrate Pentecost 50 days after Easter and changed the focus of the day, for something amazing and unexpected happened as followers gathered for this festival.

It had been only seven weeks after Jesus had died, and although some had experienced the resurrection and knew that Jesus' presence was somehow mysteriously still with them, I imagine they were still feeling the loss of not hearing his teachings day-in-and-day-out. In the Book of Acts, we are told the disciples had just finished selecting another disciple to replace Judas, who had killed himself after turning in Jesus to authorities. I can't imagine their sorrow at the loss of Judas, mixed with the excitement of choosing Matthias as his replacement.

Before we even get a chance to catch our breath in the story from Acts, we are hurled along with this small group of Jesus' followers to the place they had gathered, huddled together, possibly in secrecy

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and mixed with apprehension. Everybody in the streets was preparing for the Pentecost festival, but I imagine Jesus' followers were not yet in the mood for celebration.

Then, in that small place they had gathered, they heard a loud sound as though wind blew through the room. The energy was so real it felt as though fire had entered the room, like tongues of fire dancing over their heads. The Spirit of fire propelled them into the streets to tell about their experience of Christ's presence among them. Although people had gathered from many countries and spoke many languages, they could somehow sense the excitement and understand the words of this transformed group of Jesus' followers.

Many people wanted to be part of this emerging movement and joined what we recognize as the beginning or birthday of the church. It would not be an easy journey, a movement that has lasted over 2000 years so far, filled with ups and downs, persecution and joy, periods of growth and times of decline.

Instead of celebrating that first church birthday with candles lit with matches, they celebrated with what looked like tongues of fire dancing over their heads. As I thought about the imagery of fire dancing around the disciples, I thought of two ways this image of fire may relate to churches today:

First, I've sometimes talked with people who have left a church, hearing how they got burned by the emotional turmoil of congregational life. Sometimes the fire gets a bit too intense; feelings get hurt; and some get discouraged, so they leave.

I wonder why some give up so easily on the church. If we eat a bad meal, for example, we don't give up eating. We might try tasting something else, but we never give up completely on food. So why do we avoid trying new things in church or are so ready to give up the spiritual food and experience of gathering together in community?

Learning to be together is a bit like what a traveler discovered when he visited a southern restaurant for the first time.

On his first morning in the South he went into a restaurant to order breakfast, and it seemed that every dish included something called grits.... Not being familiar with this southern delicacy, he asked the waitress, “Could you tell me, exactly what is a grit?” Looking down on him with a mixture of compassion and condescension, she said, “Sugar, you can't get just one grit. They always come together.”

As Pulitzer Prize winner Annie Dillard says, “You can no more go to God alone than you can go to the North Pole alone.” We're just like grits...you can't get just one. They come together.<sup>1</sup>

Church means we come together. It's not an individual thing, and sometimes the sparks may fly when we gather together with different ideas and various ways of doing things, resulting in what may feel like a fire in which some get burned.

When Paul wrote to churches, he often encouraged them to get along, as he wrote to the Philippians in the portion we read last week: “Agree with each other, love each other, be deep-spirited friends.”<sup>2</sup> That doesn't mean we all think alike or that we allow only one understanding of God in our

church, but it means we get along even when we disagree. We Disciples of Christ agree to disagree, for even when we have different ideas, we are still united as one family through Christ.

I had a second thought in relation to fire: I sometimes wonder if churches forget to invite others to the passion of fire until it's too late. The fire gradually becomes less and less, and a church may lose its excitement.

It's like two people standing and watching as a church was being destroyed by a literal fire. One person said to another, “Hey, how are you doing? I haven't seen you at church for a while. Matter of fact, I don't think I've ever seen you at this church.” The other replied, “You never invited me, so this is the first time I've attended. Today is the first time I've seen this church on fire.”

Do you ever think the church has lost its fire—that it's no longer burning with passion? Have you ever felt unexcited about inviting someone to attend the fire of worship? Sometimes we begin to take things for granted, not wanting something

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new, not wanting change. We get too comfortable, and soon we forget there's a fire among us. We may even discover that we've replaced the burning fire with the fire extinguisher of worry.

We often find so many things to worry about in the church, don't we? We worry about not enough money. We worry about not enough people. We worry about being asked to do something that makes us uncomfortable. And then we mix those worries with the ones from home or work, and soon we feel like someone who once said: "I've got so many troubles that if anything bad happens today it will be two weeks before I can worry about it."<sup>3</sup>

When Paul wrote the church in Philippi, he also encouraged them to not worry:

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice.<sup>4</sup>

Don't fret or worry. Instead of worrying, pray. Let petitions and praises shape your worries into prayers, letting God know your concerns. Before you know it, a sense of God's wholeness, everything coming together for good, will come and settle you down. It's wonderful what happens when Christ displaces worry at the center of your life.<sup>5</sup>

On this Pentecost Sunday, let's put away the fire extinguishers of worry, and instead, stoke the fire of God's Spirit by celebrating what God is doing. Like the disciples who went into the streets and gave birth to the church, go out and invite others to experience what God is doing here in this place, and may you continue to be on fire.

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<sup>5</sup> Philippians 4:6-7, *The Message Bible*

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<sup>1</sup> John E. Harnish, Collected Sermons, [www.Sermons.com](http://www.Sermons.com)

<sup>2</sup> Philippians 2:2 *The Message Bible*

<sup>3</sup> Hodgins, Michael. *1001 More Humorous Illustrations for Public Speaking: Fresh, Timely, and Compelling Illustrations for Preachers, Teachers, and Speakers* (Kindle Locations 4575-4576). Zondervan. Kindle Edition, #938.

<sup>4</sup> Philippians 4:4, *NRSV*