

Sermon: “Fan the Flame”
Scripture: 2 Timothy 1:1-14
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Since my childhood I’ve enjoyed campfires. Well . . . mostly enjoyed.

The truth is that I’m rather afraid of campfires that are fully ablaze. I’m afraid to get too close. From a distance, I find them beautiful, but up close I find them painful. The heat is almost unbearable. And those sparks. They are unpredictable as the fire pops and the sparks fly out.

When the campfire settles a bit, I’m more comfortable. I feel I can draw closer. I can enjoy the warmth. I can enjoy the beauty without being afraid.

But the stage at which I enjoy campfires the most is when the flames have died down. It’s very safe to get close. There are only those hot embers. It’s mellow. It’s comfortable. Perhaps my favorite part of this kind of campfire is that it’s the perfect time to roast marshmallows and make s’mores.

In the early chapters of the New Testament book of Acts, we read of a fire that ignited the Christian church. This was a fire that was fully ablaze. It was scary. It was unpredictable.

The account of the Day of Pentecost describes the followers of Jesus after His crucifixion and resurrection as they await the gift Jesus promised them. As these followers of Jesus are gathered together, the Holy Spirit comes upon them. Luke tells us in Acts that “divided tongues as of fire, appeared among them and a tongue rested on each of them.”

The promised Holy Spirit “fired up” these believers to go out and take the necessary risks to spread the Gospel. The believers got so fired up that some people were afraid of them. Some kept their distance. Some found their words of truth unbearable—too hot to handle. The church at this time was like a campfire fully ablaze.

Later in the book of Acts, Luke tells us of Paul. Paul, for a time, persecuted these fired up Christians. He was a faithful Jew. Their message made him burn with anger. But Jesus spoke to Paul. Paul was blinded by the light of Jesus and became a follower of Jesus—a follower perhaps more “fired up” than all the rest. He traveled extensively, preaching the Gospel of

Jesus. His message so angered people that he was beaten, disparaged and imprisoned.

Paul founded churches as he traveled and along the way he met Timothy. Timothy became Paul's trusted companion and fellow worker in the Gospel ministry. When Paul departed from Timothy's home town, he left Timothy in charge of a group of churches.

Don't you imagine that Timothy was on fire for the Lord? Don't you imagine that he was ready to minister boldly in Christ's name? Sure he was. But when we read from 2 Timothy today (one of Paul's letters to Timothy) we see that Timothy is tired out. He's afraid and timid. He's now been lulled into being a no-risk-taking status quo Christian leader. Once a blazing fire . . . later a manageable comfortable flame . . . Timothy's ministry is now a mellow campfire – low key, mellow, cozy. S'mores anyone?

How did this happen to faithful Timothy? For one, Christians were being persecuted. (Remember Paul was beaten, imprisoned and ultimately executed.) Timothy was undoubtedly afraid, and for good reason. Certainly Timothy had the other frustrations which come with leadership. It's hard to stay fired up and to keep others fired up, especially when the going gets tough.

Paul writes to Timothy to encourage him. Get RE-fired up. "Rekindle the gift of God that is within you through the laying on of my hands for God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline."

Fear—a spirit of cowardice—can be so very powerful and destructive. Richard Fairchild in his sermon titled "A Little Is a Lot" tells of a legend from the Orient "about a traveler making his way to a large city. One night he meets two other travelers along the road—Fear and Plague.

"Plague explains to the traveler that, once they arrived, they are expected to kill 10,000 people in the city. The traveler asks Plague if Plague would do all the killing. Oh no, Plague replies. I shall kill only a few hundred. My friend Fear will kill the others."

Fear is very powerful and destructive to us as individuals and to the Church of Jesus Christ. Fear is powerful enough to make us step back from the fire, to choose to avoid the fire, to walk away from it. We prefer the mellow marshmallow-roasting kind of fire. We prefer cozy Christianity to fired-up Christianity which challenges us to take risks even when we're scared.

One writer has asked rather pointedly: "If the Holy Spirit left us, how long would it be until we noticed?" And, perhaps even more pointedly: "If the Holy Spirit left us, how long would it be before OTHERS noticed?"

I do not believe the Holy Spirit ever leaves us, nor does the Spirit withdraw from us the Spiritual Gifts He has given us. However, we can ignore the Spirit. Our gifts can become ineffective because of our neglect of them.

That's why Paul says to Timothy: "Rekindle the gift of God within you through the laying on of my hands, for God did not give us a Spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power, and of love and self-discipline." Paul is saying to Timothy: stay the course, stay fired up. Yes, it will be more difficult, more dangerous, more painful. There will be nothing mellow about it, but stay the course. Get RE-fired up for the gospel.

What are we afraid of today—individually and as a church? What keeps us from being fired up? Are we afraid about money and other resources? Will there be enough? Are we afraid of looking foolish? Are we afraid of failing? Are we afraid of being too radical?

We often hear about "moderation in all things." This may be good advice in some arenas of life. But I must confess that I see very little about moderation in the scriptures. "Leave everything behind and follow me." "Sell what you have." "Forgive over and over again." "If someone forces you to walk a mile, go the second." This is what is so challenging about staying the course of Christian discipleship, of not losing heart, and remaining fired up. It's not middle-of-the-road stuff we're asked to do. It's tiring, taxing and at times overwhelming.

And so we come to the Lord's Table today, knowing our fatigue, our fears and our lack of self-discipline. Most of come knowing full well that we much prefer the mellow, cozy type of Christianity that makes us feel good to the radical call of the gospel which scares or challenges us to take risks.

We come to this Table to be refueled. We come here knowing the Holy Spirit will "fan the flame," to get us out of the mellow zone—the comfort zone. And so we approach this Table with mixed feelings. At this Table we are changed—if we are open. At this Table we are refueled for ministry—if we are open. At this Table we remember Jesus who gave Himself freely, completely and radically for all of us. His life and His death inspire us to do the same.

O Holy Spirit, rekindle the gift of God that is within us . . . for God did not give us a spirit of cowardice bur rather a spirit of power, love and self-discipline. O Holy Spirit, help us to stay the course. Help us to take the risk of standing beside the blazing fire. Fan the flame.