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Pentecost Again: But When the Fire Goes Cold?

Acts 2:1-11; 12-18 When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. 2 And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. 3 Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. 4 All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability. ... 12 All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "What does this mean?" 13 But others sneered and said, "They are filled with new wine." 14 But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them, "Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. 15 Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o'clock in the morning. 16 No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel: 17 'In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. 18 Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy."

I first learned my love of music from my parents. When I was growing up they had a big collection of LPs (remember those?) and always had one playing on the huge, ebony stereo that took up one whole wall of the living room. When I became a teenager, we averted war in our house by their getting me my own record player for Christmas one year, since my taste at that time ran to the Beatles and the Rolling Stones (music that seemed so radical then, but which now can be heard in elevator muzak). My parents particularly enjoyed movie musicals – “South Pacific” and “The Sound of Music” were two I remember particularly – as well as some of the singers of that era whom we now label as giants – folks like Frank Sinatra, Bing Crosby, and Peggy Lee. One of the most haunting songs from that era is Peggy Lee’s marvelous, depressing, beautiful, and sad song “Is That All There Is?” The song is haunting, in part, because of the way that it is done: Ms. Lee precedes each of the verses with a spoken description of some event: the calamity of a fire in her childhood home, her

father taking her to a circus, and her first love. Following each of these spoken descriptions, she then sings the song's simple and sad lyrics:

*Is that all there is, is that all there is?
If that's all there is my friends, then let's keep dancing
Let's break out the booze and have a ball
If that's all there is.¹*

Those lines remind me of a line from the Book of Ecclesiastes: *"What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done; there is nothing new under the sun."* (Eccl 1:9 NRSV).

But we know that feeling sometimes, don't we? Preacher Phillip McLarty says this: We **all** experience *"from time to time ... losing our enthusiasm, feeling burned out, getting to a place in life where the thrill is gone, and we just don't care."*² We start new jobs that excite us, that cause us to bring our best to our work, that make us want to get up each morning and rush to work. But over time, the thrill gets sucked out and rather than a lure for the imagination the job is now just a means to a paycheck. Or, McLarty says, you

get married, go on your honeymoon, settle in to build a life together, raise a family, get the kids through school. Life whizzes by so fast you hardly have time to paste pictures in a scrapbook. You scrimp and save and invest and work around the clock; then, before you know it, you're there – the kids are off on their own, you've paid off the mortgage, you're got enough seniority to feel secure – all the while, life's not as fun as it used to be. You find yourself getting restless and wondering, "Is this all there is...?"

¹<http://www.lyricsdepot.com/peggy-lee/is-that-all-there-is.html>

²<http://www.lectionary.org/Sermons/McLarty/Acts/Acts%2002.1-21,%20FireCold.htm> I have gratefully borrowed very heavily from Rev. McLarty's sermon throughout this sermon. Moreover please note: in the rest of this sermon, any direct quotes that have no stated attribution are from this sermon by Rev. McLarty.

Which leads me to our question of the morning: What **do** you do when you find yourself in such a state, what do you do when the fire goes cold?

Because it **can** happen to any of us; in fact I daresay that is **has** happened at one time or another to all of us. Jobs can come to leave us cold and dissatisfied. Organizations that we once believed in can let us down. Political candidates that we invested our hopes in are less than we believed them to be. Burnout is a particular problem for those in the helping professions – the teachers and retired teachers in this room know that there are indeed days that you do your job just out of duty not because of a sense of excitement and zest; sometimes you have given so much to others that your tank just runs dry and you find yourself running on fumes. Or sometimes just the sheer amount of clutter and information in our lives can be immobilizing. The sheer amount of data online and on 500 cable tv channels is sometimes simply mesmerizingly immobilizing – even as your soul is crying out that it's not more **data** that you need it's more **wisdom**.

In the face of all of this, Rev. McLarty says this: *“For whatever reason, it's not uncommon for the fire within us to grow cold. The question is, when it does, how do you get it going again?... when God seems distant and far away; when scripture no longer speaks to you as it once did; when you find it hard to pray ... what can you do to get back on track?”* What do you do when that spiritual fire goes cold? First, let's return to the Pentecost story. What happened on that first Pentecost? Preacher Richard Donovan sums it up this way:

Christians retreated into hiding after the crucifixion and waited quietly for God to act. Now the time has come! The heavens roar! Fire burns! The Spirit of God fills! Disciples preach! Crowds [are in] wonder!”⁶

No cold hearts here! The fire burns hot and bright. Hot and bright enough that 3000

³Quoted by McLarty at <http://www.lectionary.org/Sermons/McLarty/Acts/Acts%2002.1-21,%20FireCold.htm>

people believe and are baptized. Hot and bright enough to engender the beginnings of a church that would, within three short centuries become the official religion of the Roman Empire. The Spirit worked its wonders on the previously cowardly Peter to not only preach the first sermon of his life but to become the leader of this new movement bravely standing up to Roman threats and violence. It was the same Spirit that would soon burn hot and bright in Paul as he took the message of the Gospel to the furthest ends of the Empire.

But what happens when the fire grows cold? I sometimes wonder about those 3000 who were baptized. Did any of them have the experience portrayed in the wonderful movie “Tender Mercies”? Do you know the film? It is the story of a down on his luck, alcoholic, grizzled, hard-scrabble former country and western music star named Mac Sledge, who finds himself after a binge at a little motel in Texas run by a widow and her twelve-year old son, who are trying hard to make ends meet in a tough place. To make a long story short, Mac learns the meaning of grace through them, attends church with them, and finally one Sunday morning is baptized along with the widow’s son. One writer describes the scene in a beautiful way: *“After the pastor dunks him into the waters of baptism, Mac stands back up, blinking and drenched, water dripping down off his balding head and glistening on his grizzled beard. It’s a portrait of grace.”* But afterwards Mac and the boy have this conversation riding home in Mac’s pickup truck, where the boy says, *“Well, we done it. We got baptized.”* ‘Yup, we sure did,’ Mac replies. ‘You feel any different?’ the lad asks. Chuckling, Mac says, *‘I can’t say I do, not really.’*⁴ How many of that 3000 baptized by Peter went home and the next day, the next week, the next month found the fire had gone out and they too said *“I can’t say I feel any different, really”*?

⁴<http://www.calvincrc.org/sermons/2005/col2BorgerOrd.html>

What happens when the fire grows cold? What happens when that fire grows cold in your life or mine, and how **do** you and I recover that sense of the Spirit of God that so animated us at one point in our lives, but now may seem distant and cool to the touch. What **do** you do on those days, or weeks, or even months when your own spiritual fire seems banked, and what was a fire is now indeed more like embers? How do you re-ignite the flame? Well, Pastor McLarty suggests three things that you can do when your fire grows cold. His first suggestion

is to break the cycle. Step out of the rut you're in and get a new perspective on life. Get up at a different time, change your diet, turn off the T.V. and read a book instead. Take up a new hobby. Learn to speak a new language. Travel..... Get some exercise. Step out of your comfort zone. It'll make you feel better.

He's right. And it strikes me that there is an important difference implied in his words between "**routine**" and "**rut**." We all need our routines. They make life possible. Routines are what allow us to get the kids woken, fed, dressed and out the door to school morning after morning. When people move, one of the things that they report – and this is certainly my experience – is that they suddenly have no routines, and absolutely everything is new, novel, takes thought and that that is exhausting. But routines **can** become deadening, they can cool our spiritual fires when they become **ruts**, when we do things in the way that we do because we don't have the energy or the will or the imagination to do things some other way. That's when McLarty's advice, hard as it is to take, can be essential. You have to force yourself to change something about those routines that have become ruts. Writer Ellen Glasgow's line in this regard is sobering: "*The only difference between a rut and a grave is their dimensions.*"⁵

McLarty's second suggestion about what to do when you sense that the fire has

⁵<http://www.quoteworld.org/quotes/5476>

gone cold is this: “...go back to the basics [because a] fire starts going out the minute you stop kindling it.” What does that mean for your spiritual life or mine? McLarty says this:

When we stop reading and studying and reaching out for new life experiences... the fire within us grows cold in a hurry. To keep this from happening, we need to go back to the basics and spend a little time each day reading the Bible, praying to God and doing good deeds for others. It's amazing how stale life can become when you get away from these basic disciplines.

Reading the Bible, praying, doing good deeds for others. My friends, have you drifted away from one of these basics? I know that at those times in my life when I neglected that sort of spiritual kindling, my fires quickly went cold indeed. When I would get out of the habit and discipline of seeking to do good deeds for others, I found myself self-absorbed and self-pitying. When I put off praying, my soul would get chilled fast. What about you? What basics might you need to go back to or re-kindle? Well, Pastor McLarty suggests when your fire grows cold, then

...pick a book of the Bible you've never studied before.... Get yourself some study aids and dig deep. You'll be surprised what you'll find.... And don't let a day go by without doing something nice for others, especially those who can't pay you back. Practice random acts of kindness and, when possible, do it anonymously.

I can hardly think of better advice!

McLarty's third and final suggestion is that we make sure we stay connected with one another. Sometimes when our spiritual fires grow cold, we want to isolate ourselves. Or sometimes when our fires have ebbed we find ourselves doing or thinking things that don't seem right or good and we badly need someone to think with us and to remind us of what is truly good and meaningful. In other words, we need the

church. Perhaps you've heard this little story before, but it's apt here and it always speaks to me; it's the story of a

...man who dropped out of church. He figured he could be just as faithful worshiping God on his own. A few weeks went by, and the minister came to visit. It was a cold and blustery day. They sat in the living room by the fireplace and made small talk. Then the minister took the fire tongs, picked up a glowing ember and placed it to one side of the hearth. The two men watched without saying a word. In no time, it began to cool. A few minutes later, he picked up the dead ember with his fingers and pitched it back into fire. Immediately, it sparked back to life. Without a word, the minister put on his coat and started to leave. The man looked at him and said, "That was one of your best sermons. I'll see you in church this Sunday."

Now, it may seem a little ironic to be preaching to those assembled in the church about staying connected to the church, but I know just how easy it is to come to think that church is an option rather than a necessity for one's soul. I know that some folks struggle with an inner voice that would tell them that they are not good enough to be in church. If any of these apply to you, then remember: your fires will indeed grow cooler if you stay away from the community where you are shown God's unconditional love, and where you are therefore freed to live that love without fear.

Because that's finally what keeps our fires burning: the unconditional love of God. A love which loves you just as you are but loves you too much to ever leave you where you are. The hymn which we sang for our prayer hymn last Sunday says this:

*Breathe on me, breath of God,
Till I am wholly Thine,
Till all this earthly part of me
Glows with Thy fire divine.*

May it be so! Amen.