

Rev. Derek Fairman

27th Sunday in Ordinary Time C

In the second reading, St. Paul tells St. Timothy to stir into flame the gift of God that St. Timothy received through the imposition of St. Paul's hands. This might remind us of the gift of the Holy Spirit which we received in Confirmation. There are seven gifts of the Holy Spirit. Piety, Fear of the Lord, Counsel, Strength, Knowledge, Understanding, and Wisdom. In Confirmation, we receive the Holy Spirit, but specifically to receive these gifts from Him.

These gifts help us to make decisions, but also to bear witness to the Lord. St. Paul told St. Timothy to not be afraid to witness to the Lord. St. Paul tells St. Timothy that he must bear hardship for the sake of the Gospel with the strength that comes from God. What exactly does this mean? We keep in mind what the Lord tells us in the Gospel, that if the disciples have faith the size of a mustard seed, they can move mulberry trees into the sea. We will get to that later.

Sometimes people are described as being "on fire." We might immediately think that this means that the Holy Spirit is working. That could be the case, but it could be something else. We need to be careful about the ways in which people seem to be devoted to something.

The paradigm of the Holy Spirit working in our hearts and souls is the image of the Unburnt Bush. There are several things to notice about the Unburnt Bush. First, the fire was controlled. The fire was not burning out of control, and did not consume the tree or bush. The Unburnt Bush was a symbol of God's love: what kind of fire burns without consuming the object that is on fire? Love. So, the bush was not consumed. St. Paul mentions in the second reading that the Holy Spirit is not "a spirit of cowardice but rather of power and love and self-control."

There is a kind of fire that will burn out of control and will devour anything in its way: fear. Fear has a way of taking over everything. Sir Winston Churchill once said, "A fanatic is one who cannot change his mind and will not change the subject." George Santayana defined fanaticism this way, "Fanaticism consists of redoubling your effort when you have forgotten your aim." Probably the best way to understand fanaticism is Carl Jung's definition: "Fanaticism is repressed doubt." There is a bit of truth in those sayings, but the point is that doubt and fear can be turned into energetic devotion to some kind of idea or something else. Doubt and fear produce the kind of fire that consumes everything. Doubt and fear are emotions that consume people and their personalities. Doubt and fear are not the gifts of piety and fear of the Lord. Fear of the Lord refers to reverence, rather than panic.

Faith is a noble mistress. Faith uses reason and other gifts in her service, but they are her servants. She does not mistreat them, but allows them to retain their individual properties and characteristics. When we think about someone who serves another, the servant has a life independent of the other. When someone's faith is enflamed, the person loves deeply, but can still respect the boundaries of others. To use Sir Winston Churchill's point, the person can and will change the subject, especially if continuing the subject is not done out of love but out of a desire to win.

Fear and doubt are cruel mistresses. They do not use others like reason in their service, but make slaves of them. Ultimately, all the other parts of a person's life are consumed until there is nothing left but the fear, but the doubt. Fear and doubt do not respect boundaries or the characteristics of others. Like the night, in which shapes and colors of objects are lost in the darkness, everything is lost to fear and doubt. This flame is not the fire of love, but a fire that devours everything, and does not care about the one on fire.

Sometimes, people are impressed by how much a person is devoted to an idea. This does not mean that the idea is correct. There are people in the world who are very devoted to wealth, but that does not mean that greed is a good thing, especially whenever that greed deprives others of necessities. Someone's dedication is not necessarily indicative of the truth of their beliefs.

If the fire in someone's life is the fire of doubt or fear, it is not a fire that burns well. There are ways to ensure that the fire can keep going, but that is not going to bring lasting peace. Yes, one may keep throwing wood on the fire, but what will that do to the forest? The point is that fear and doubt take up a lot of energy and resources.

True piety and fear of the Lord bring a love that burns, a love like the Unburnt Bush. The fear of the Lord has to do with reverence, not terror or anxiety. Piety gives us a love for God that will endure any trial and will overcome fear and doubt. St. Paul reminded St. Timothy that this love will conquer, and that there was no need to fear. The strength of God's love would not burn St. Timothy, nor will it burn us.

As we approach the altar, we ask the Lord to show us love, deep love that burns in a way that endures, rather than a fire that makes an impressive and attention-getting show, and then quickly dies off. The deep fire of love will not consume everything in its path; rather it shows control. This month of October is pro-life month, and our respect for life must come from love, rather than from any fanaticism or need to win.