

Burned but not Consumed

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the 3rd Sunday after Pentecost, June 4, 1989 at St. Christopher's Episcopal Church, the Sunday following the burning of the historic sanctuary of the Oxford Presbyterian Church. Scripture Lessons: Exodus 3:1-12; Psalm 137:1-6; 1 Peter 1:1-9; Matthew 16:13-18.

Almost two years ago I preached a sermon on our OT lesson just after the completion of the renovation of our church buildings. I couldn't help but think of that sermon Monday morning. As we were cleaning up on Monday afternoon I found that the sermon had survived the fire. I also found with the sermon a note that our church secretary sent to all our elders the day after I preached the sermon. She wrote: "I am sending this memo to all Elders. I am passing a copy of the tape (of the service) to all Elders that were not present on Sunday, July 19, at the worship service. Ted has spoken many times to all of us, the need... to have a vision for our church. This sermon gives us that vision. Please prayerfully listen to this tape of the sermon, music, and prayer. I personally long to see this vision come true.... Please be open to what the Lord may say ... so we can all work toward this vision... Thank you so very much and may God place this vision in each of our hearts." This morning I want to give that sermon again with only slight revisions.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

Our renovations are almost complete. Except for the rebuilding of the organ only a few things remain. *But what God wants isn't just a renovated building, but a renovated people.*

The other day I was standing over by the oak tree on the Green admiring this building. I was looking up at the steeple. I thought I saw smoke coming out of one of the little round openings about two-thirds of the way up the steeple. Then I imagined long tongues of flame shooting out of the louvers in the tower. Then, in my imagination, I saw flames coming through the stained glass windows. Within moments the slate roof was engulfed in tongues of red, yellow, green and blue fire. The whole church, including the Christian Education wing, was in flames. But, and here's the strange thing, the church wasn't being consumed by the fire. It glowed like molten gold being refined.

The streets filled with people. Business women and business men stood in the doors of their stores looking, wide-eyed, up at the church. Men and women in the barber shop and beauty salons came out and pointed to the Presbyterian church. Residents in the old Oxford Hotel leaned out windows and called others to look at this strange sight, a church on fire

yet not consumed. Children playing in the park stopped swinging and ran toward the burning church. Old men and women, young mothers holding infants, and little boys and girls came running to this church to see this great sight. Many of these people had walked by the church for years and never noticed it. Now they stand filled with wonder at what they're seeing, a church on fire and yet not consumed.

Then I heard the voice of God speaking from within this burning church saying, "Don't come near; take off your shoes, for the place on which you're standing is holy ground. I'm the God of Alexander Gellatly whom I sent as your first pastor from the Presbytery of Edinburgh, Scotland in 1753. I'm the God of Samuel Jackson, John Hawthorn, John Fulton, William Ramsey, James Wherry, and William Ross, the first elders in this congregation when you met in a tent in the valley. I'm the God of your fathers and mothers who've worshipped and served me in this town for two hundred and fifty years." At the sound of the voice of God everybody hid their face in awe.

And the voice of the Lord continued, "I've seen the affliction of my people in Oxford. I've heard the cries of my people who've forgotten my name. I've heard the cries of parents worried because their teenage sons and daughters have no ongoing support group to help them grow as Christians. I've heard the cries of men and women in this church who hunger and thirst to be fed on the Word of God. I've heard the cries of single people and divorced, of men and women whose marriages are failing. I've heard the cries of shut-ins and senior citizens, of grieving men and women, of migrants and transients, of businessmen and women, of farmers and workers. I've heard the cries of the homeless and those who are marginally employed. I've heard the cry of people enslaved by fears, habits

and lifestyles from which they can't break free. I *know* their sufferings and I've come down to deliver them."

Then the voice of the Lord said, "Come, I'm going to deliver my people through you." When Nancy Andress called me on Sunday night to tell me how bad the fire was my first reaction was blank despair. I sat down and just stared at the wall. I felt like Moses, "O God, who am I that I should lead your people through this?" I said to God, "I think I can lead a church that's already established but I don't know anything about how to rebuild a church after a fire. I don't know where to begin. I have no experience. I feel so inadequate. I can't do it. Who am I?" But the Lord's response silenced me. "But I will be with you," he said.

For centuries Presbyterians have seen the burning bush as a symbol of Christ's church. It's a symbol of Israel in the furnace of affliction in Egypt *and yet not consumed*. It's the symbol of the Church in the furnace of persecution and yet not consumed. The emblem of the Church of Scotland is a burning bush with the Latin motto *Nec tamen con-sum'-e-ba'-tur* - 'and it shall not be consumed'. That same burning bush appears on the logo of our own denomination. The kind of church that God wants is a church on fire and yet not consumed.

What are some of the marks of a church that burns and yet isn't consumed? Traditionally Presbyterians have taught that the marks of the church are the preaching of the Word of God, the celebration of the Sacraments, and church discipline. But we all know of churches who have these marks but they're cold and dieing. What, then, are some of the marks of a church that's on fire and yet not consumed? In addition to those three traditional marks of the church, there are at least five others that must be present if our church is to be on fire and yet not consumed.

1. A church that's on fire and yet not consumed is one that *knows what its mission is*. The Lord said to Moses, "Come, I will send you to Pharaoh that you may bring forth my people." Moses knew what his mission was, to lead God's people out of Egypt. The success or failure of our church isn't determined by the state of repair of its buildings, or the size of our membership, or by its historical significance, but solely by our faithfulness in carrying out the mission that God has given us in this town, in this nation, and in the world. Dr. Emil Brunner used to say that the church exists by mission as fire exists by burning. But so often the church is so bogged down in simply maintaining what's been built in the past that we don't have time, money, energy or resources to reach out. I like the mission statement in our Book of Order: "The great ends of the church are the proclamation of the gospel for the salvation of humankind; the shelter, nurture, and spiritual fellowship of the children of God; the maintenance of divine worship; the preservation of the truth; the promotion of social righteousness; and the exhibition of the Kingdom of Heaven to the world."

2. A church that burns and is yet not consumed is a church that *enjoys real fellowship*. The Greek word for *fellowship* is *koinonia*. It means *sharing*; sharing not only money and possessions but sharing burdens and griefs. So often a church is filled with people who outwardly look contented and at peace but inwardly are crying out for someone to love them just as they are—confused, frustrated, often frightened, guilty, and often unable to communicate even within their own families. But we seldom have the courage to admit our own deep needs before people who seem as self-sufficient as the average church member appears to be. When a church enjoys real fellowship we begin to share one another's burdens. Through fellow Christians we know that God does see our

affliction, hears our cry, knows our suffering and has come down to help us in our Lord Jesus Christ.

3. A church that burns and is yet not consumed is a church that's *committed to prayer*. So often prayer in the church is confined to formal prayer in the liturgy or a rather perfunctory opening and closing of meetings with prayer. But a church on fire is a church that expresses its utter dependence on the Lord Jesus Christ through prayer. When God encountered Moses in the burning bush Moses spoke to God in spontaneous prayer. I know a lot of you were praying Sunday night who have, perhaps, not prayed much at all for a long time. And I believe that a lot more people are going to feel that our Wednesday evening prayer meeting is far more important to the health and recovery of our church than has been felt before. I believe that a lot of us are going to be spending more time in prayer, personal prayer and family prayer as well as in church. And we're going to be praying, not only for our church buildings, but for all of Oxford as well as our nation and world. When we hear about fires and other kinds of tragedies we're now going to know better how to pray. We're going to remember the homeless more often in our prayers now that we're homeless.

4. A church that burns and is yet not consumed *meets together in small groups* for study, nurture, prayer, and service. All kinds of small groups are needed: youth groups, women's circles, Sunday School classes, choirs; support groups for singles, parents, couples, young adults, senior citizens, alcoholics; involvement in the committees of the session. All these help to fulfil the need for a more personal encounter with the Lord Jesus Christ. God has called us into the church for service as well as salvation. If, after joining a church, a person doesn't become a part of

some small group within the congregation for service and nurture their faith wanes and they're very likely to fall away and become inactive and begin to question if their encounter with the Lord was ever real.

5. A church that burns and is yet not consumed genuinely *enjoys corporate worship*. Worship is truly corporate whenever there's a strong sense of belonging, a strong sense of togetherness and community. Worship is dynamic whenever the Spirit of the living God, through Word and Sacrament, stirs and inspires us and whenever profound help and hope are shared. In truly corporate worship our eyes are opened to the presence of the living God and we know we're standing on holy ground.

Here then, are five marks of a church that's on fire and yet not consumed. We know what our mission is. We enjoy fellowship. We're committed to prayer. We meet in small groups for nurture and service. *And we enjoy corporate worship.*

When a church is on fire and yet not consumed it automatically gets the attention of everybody near and far. Like Moses, all sorts of people, young and old, turn aside and see this great sight, why the church is on fire and yet not consumed. In the coming weeks we'll be bearing witness to the reality of the power and presence of the Risen Christ. We'll bear witness to the fact that a church can be on fire and yet not consumed.

The Lord Jesus Christ once said, "I will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire." He said, "I have come to send fire upon the earth." We've experienced something of that this past week. Let the fire of the Holy Spirit spread until everyone in our church and in all of Oxford sees this great sight, a church on fire and yet not consumed.

Let us pray: Almighty and everliving God, ruler of all things in heaven and earth, hear our prayers for this parish family. Strengthen the faithful, arouse the careless, and restore the penitent. Set us on fire so that we won't be consumed. Grant us all things necessary for our common life, and bring us all to be of one heart and mind within your holy Church; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Prayers of the People

Glory be to you on high, O Lord. We praise you, we bless you, we worship you: we glorify you, we give thanks to you for your great glory. O Lord, you take away the sins of the world. You sit at the right hand of God the Father; have mercy on us and receive our prayer.

Gracious God; you have opened your hand to give us so many good things. You keep us beneath the shadow of your wings. You provide for us like a mother and father. You love us as a friend and hear our cries and have come down to deliver us. We thank you for our salvation through Christ. In gratitude for your grace, we want to continue to serve you in this world and in this town.

Hear our requests which we make through Jesus Christ, our great high-priest.

We pray for all who have been victims of natural disasters. O Lord, you weave out of terrible happenings wonders of goodness and grace. Surround those who have been shaken by tragedy with a sense of your present love and hold them in faith. Though our sanctuary is lost, may we find you and be comforted. Help us to trust your mercy and power.

We pray for firefighters and all those in dangerous occupations. Give them caution along with their courage. Protect them in this important work for which they volunteer. May they sense that they carry out their job under your watchful love.

We pray for the mission of the church. Everliving God, whose will it is that all should come to you through your Son Jesus Christ: Inspire our witness to him, that all may know the power of his forgiveness and the hope of his resurrection.

We pray as well for this particular church where we are meeting this morning. We pray for Father John Obenchain and the ministry of St. Christopher's Episcopal church and for all the men and women who minister for you here. Strengthen and support them in their ministry. Thank you for the ministry of Word, Sacrament and Service they have in this town and building.

We pray for the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (USA). Almighty God: in Jesus Christ you called disciples and, by the Holy Spirit, made them one church to serve you. Be with members of our General Assembly. Help them to welcome new things you are doing in the world, and to respect old things. Save them from senseless controversy. In their decisions, determine what is good for all of us. As the General Assembly meets, let your Spirit rule, so that our church may be joined in love and service to Jesus Christ, who, having gone before us, is coming to meet us in the promise of your Kingdom.

We pray for President George Bush, the Congress and Senate, for all Judges and legislators as well as for all world leaders. May they be led by your wisdom as they lead others. Put down greed, pride, and anger which set nations against one another. Speed the day when wars will end and all people bow their knee to the crucified and risen Lord.

Lord Jesus Christ, you are the great shepherd of the sheep, the great physician. Be with all those who are sick, who are facing surgery or recovering from surgery... especially we pray for those whom we know and love... for Lucy Wilson, Mary Farra, Angela Wray...

Lord, we thank you for all your saints who have witnessed in their lives a good confession, and especially for those dear to us who have fallen asleep in the Lord. Grant us grace, O Lord, so to follow them as they followed Christ, that we may be one with them in spirit.

And now as Christ our Savior has taught us, hear us as we humbly pray...

*Jan
Chira*