

**“Are You on Fire or Burned Out?”**

Acts 2:42-47

*Series: Believe Week 6 The Church*

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The Woodside Church

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When we celebrate great revolutionary leaders of the Church such as St. Francis, Martin Luther, Martin Luther King, and Mother Teresa we often overlook the frustrations, failures, and fears they faced and overcame to change the world. They were on fire for the Lord. At the same time all of them faced the danger of burn out.

Take for example John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist Church. Living during the time of our American Revolution, Wesley faced tremendous opposition from the Church in his day. A single page from his journal testifies to his holy perseverance.

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| Sunday a.m., May 5  | Preached in St. Ann’s; was asked not to come back any more.                                     |
| Sunday p.m., May 5  | Preached at St. John’s; deacons said, “Get out and stay out.”                                   |
| Sunday a.m., May 12 | Preached at St. Jude’s; can’t go back there either.   |
| Sunday p.m., May 12 | Preached at St. George’s; kicked out again.   |
| Sunday a.m., May 19 | Preached at St. Somebody Else’s; deacons called special meeting and said I couldn’t return.     |
| Sunday p.m., May 19 | Preached on the street; kicked off the street.  |
| Sunday a.m., May 26 | Preached out in a meadow; chased out of meadow when a bull was turned loose during the service. |
| Sunday a.m., June 2 | Preached out at the edge of town; kicked off the highway.                                       |
| Sunday p.m., June 2 | Afternoon service, preached in pasture; 10,000 people came.                                     |

Wesley preached more than 45,000 sermons, wrote over 400 books and pamphlets and, traveled a distance equivalent to nine times around the world (mostly on horseback). One time a listener asked John Wesley why such large crowds came out to hear him preach. He simply replied, “I set myself on fire and people come to watch me burn.”

God wants to set you on fire. He wants to fill you with the fire of the Holy Spirit and change the world through you, me and this great movement called the Church. Today in Believe our topic is the Church. For the past five weeks we have been looking up. We focused on our vertical relationship with the Triune God who saves our lives, guides our lives with the Bible, and fills our lives with the identity of Christ. For the next few weeks we look horizontally at one another. We begin with the Church. The key idea is: “I believe the Church is God’s primary way to accomplish his purposes on earth.” Or to

quote those two great theologians The Blues Brothers: “We’re on a mission from God.” So what’s the mission? What does God want to accomplish through us?

Forty days after Jesus died and rose from the grave He ascended into heaven. After looking vertically at Jesus I imagine the disciples then look horizontally at each other and say, “Great. Now that He’s gone what on earth are we going to do?” Eleven guys against the world. Eleven guys who, during the last three years, failed Jesus at every turn. What is their mission now and how are they going to carry it out?

Ten days later, on Pentecost, God gives them the power to accomplish their mission. God sets them on fire and people come to watch them burn. The Holy Spirit descends on them and fills them. Visitors from many nations hear the Good News from them and three thousand become followers of Jesus. That’s the birth of the Church. It is a small example of what God wants to do on a worldwide scale. Before He left, Jesus gave this mission to the apostles and to us:

But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. (Acts 1:8)

A witness is someone who points to something or someone else. You witness the accident and give your testimony. You tell what happened so someone, usually a judge, can make a decision. You are not a witness to you. In this case, you are a witness to Jesus. Why do you witness to Jesus? So people can make a decision to find their way back to God. In The Story we learned God will go to any lengths to get us back. Since the time of Abraham God wants to bless the whole world and bring them back home (Genesis 12:1-3). No matter how dirty and stained we are, God runs to us like a Father with wide open arms. He uses us, the Church, to help them find a relationship with God.

So why don’t we, the Church, do this? We have the wrong idea about the Church.

- We think Church is an hour of the week when it’s really 24/7/365
- We think Church is an institution when it’s really a revolution
- We think Church is a monument made of stone when it’s really a movement made of people
- We think Church is a tradition we don’t want to change when it’s really a living body that is always changing.
- We think Church is a club where we pay our dues when it’s really a calling and a cause that demand our lives.
- We think Church is about me and what I get out of it when it’s really about Jesus and what I can give to Him.
- We think Church is about sitting when it’s really about sending.
- We think we GO to Church when God wants us to BE the Church.

Jesus says, “I will build my Church and the gates of Hades will not be able stand against it.” (Matthew 16:18). The fires of hell are no match for the fire of the Spirit.

Unfortunately, from the very beginning, Christians have possessed the extraordinary talent for being holy fire extinguishers. We smother the Spirit's fire. In one of his earliest letters Paul wrote, "Do not put out the Spirit's fire" (I Thessalonians 5:19). Most parents shout, "Don't play with fire." Paul cries, "Burn, baby, burn!"

So why are we not on fire? Probably because we are burned out. We are over-extended and double-booked. We are stretched and stressed for success. Yet the main reason we are burned out is we don't plug into the power of the Spirit to face life's challenges. We try to do everything on our own. We run on empty and then wonder why we feel empty. We let the fire of the Spirit die down to just a tiny flickering pilot light. The Creator of the Universe wants to supply us with all the power we need to live and serve and do His will. So how do we keep the fire burning?

The end of the second chapter of Acts gives us a beautiful picture of what happened when the Spirit set the first Christians on fire.

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved. (Acts 2:42-47)

Contained in that brief portrait of the newborn Church is a formula for keeping the fire burning. During seminary, I served as a student chaplain at Trenton Psychiatric Hospital in West Trenton. One day I attended a required class on fire safety and learned a lesson I never forgot. Simply stated, a fire requires only three elements to burn: fuel – such as paper, kindling, the 2x4s in your house, a heat source – matches or the sun's rays, and oxygen. To extinguish the flames, the firefighter only needs to take away one of these three essential elements. Years later, it struck me that the Spirit's fire also burns brightest in the presence of three elements. You need all three or the fire will go out. As we look at these three ask yourself, "Which of these three am I doing? Which do I need to add to stoke the fire of the Holy Spirit?"

The first action is to **Love God in Worship and Prayer.**

They devoted themselves...to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe...Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts...praising God. (Acts 2:42-43, 46, 47)

Too often we treat worship like it's a Yelp review. "Music was a 6. Prayers get an 8. Message was a 2. I didn't get much out of it." We often do the same with prayer. It's only worth doing if we get results or answers. When it comes to worship, don't be a passive critic. Actively invest your whole being in worship and prayer. Jesus said the first and greatest commandment is

Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. (Matthew 22:37)

The first Christians didn't treat worship as a weekly duty they had to do. It was their heart's desire. They devoted themselves to communion (the breaking of bread) and prayer. Everyone was filled with awe because *every day* they met for worship. Now I'm not suggesting you come to this building every day. Make your whole life a prayer to God. On Sunday, we start worship in here and then continue worshipping God out there. Worship and prayer are the main ways we express our love for God. The Lord is delighted when you talk with Him and tell Him how much you love Him from the moment you awake to the time you fall asleep.

My daughter Kristin moved to North Carolina this summer so her husband Bryan could pursue his MBA. She continues to work for an Advertising firm in Manhattan from her home office. They have a busy life. That's why it means so much when she takes the time to call or text me. We miss them. When my birthday arrived this month I accepted the fact that, for the first time, she wouldn't be with us. On Wednesday, three days before my birthday, Lisa walked in the door...with Kristin. I was completely surprised to see her. Apparently she had a meeting in Manhattan and stayed over to celebrate my birthday. The next morning we had breakfast before she flew home. We talked about her work and my work, their new apartment and our new grand pup Winnie. It was a great gift. She didn't want anything. She didn't need anything. She just wanted to be with me. My son Peter also treated me to a killer Michigan football game.

Nothing on earth is more precious to me than the love of my family. And if that is the way I feel when my children want to spend time with me, how much more joy must our Heavenly Father feel when we want to spend time loving Him through worship and prayer. Tell Him about everything in your day. Thank Him for everything. Place it all in His hands. So ask yourself, "Am I at least worshiping the Lord weekly with other believers?" and "Am I praying daily?"

The second action is to **Grow in Grace in a Growth Group.**

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship ... all believers were together. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts" (v. 42, 46).

Today we welcome new members to Woodside. That's worth celebrating. But we don't want members to just join a church. From the beginning the best way to devote yourselves to the Apostles' teaching in Scripture is with a small group of believers. Notice, the first Christians met in their homes. They had no church buildings. They learned the apostles' teachings in small home groups.

It's been forty years since I gave my life to Jesus and thirty years since I became a pastor and in all that time I have been part of a Growth Group. I can say, without a doubt that Christians start to grow in grace when they study God's Word, pray together and support one another in a Growth Group. It is not too late to join a group studying Believe. Better yet, we encourage everyone to start a group with your friends, neighbors, or

coworkers. Believe is easy to lead and it helps believers and skeptics to learn how to think, act and be like Jesus. Ask yourself, “Am I a member of the Body of Christ?” and “Am I part of a Growth Group?”

The third action is **Share with Others by Giving and Serving.**

All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. (Acts 2:45)

Once you start to grow in grace, your attitude begins to change. Instead of living for yourself, instead of grabbing and taking, you start giving and serving from the heart.

I see amazing ministry going on around me at Woodside. People are serving in so many ways. But there is always room for more servants. We need believers who share stories about Jesus with our young people in Sunday School, Adventure Club and youth groups. We need believers who help us lead worship on the stage or behind the scenes. We need believers to lead new Growth Groups and take part in Family Promise, Habitat, the Dinner Ministry, Recovery Ministry, Prison Ministry, Code Blue, Manor Care Worship services and our many mission trips. Above all we need everyone to step up, sign up and leave this building next Sunday to bless the community and do God’s work.

The first believers sold possessions so no one in the Church would be in need. No one told them to do this. They loved to give. They didn’t give ten percent. They gave their all. Today we ask you to make a commitment of what you will give to God’s work through Woodside in the coming year and to renew your commitment to the Share the Story building campaign. We don’t do this because it is our duty or because we are paying dues. We do this because this is one of the ways God uses us to change lives and change the world. This is one of the ways we help people find their way back to God. Your giving helped change Levi’s life from homeless guest at Code Blue to hopeful guest speaker at a Recovery service. Your giving helped Liana find encouragement, support, and the Word of God in our youth group. Your giving helps Nedson and Sebber provide healthcare, dig wells, teach job skills and plant churches in Mozambique. Your giving planted the Parkland campus led by Pastor Greg which helped Christine discover that God has a purpose and plan for her life. Your giving made it possible for us to give away over 500 Believe books, to bless many missions beyond these walls, to open our doors for the hungry, hurting and homeless, to teach hundreds of children and youth how to follow Jesus. Yet we can do more. I invite you to join me and step up to tithing, to putting God first in your life, to giving back to God 10% of all He gives you.

So when it comes to loving God, growing in grace and sharing with others, are you doing one, two or all three? If you are missing one, my challenge to you this fall is to do whatever it takes to add it. If you do all three, the fire of the Spirit will grow and spread. The story of Pentecost, when God set the Church on fire, ends with these words:

They enjoyed the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved. (Acts 2:47)

The church grew because the believers were loving God, growing in grace and sharing with others. They lived like Jesus. They were in love with Jesus. And their neighbors noticed and wanted to join them.

That's what happened to Tim Anderson. When he was a teen and had a lot of questions about God a friend invited him to a youth group that met in people's homes. He was impressed by how the other teens and adult leaders were actually living their faith in Jesus every day. It was a way of life. It was from the heart. At their invitation, Tim accepted Jesus as Lord and Savior. At that moment he felt a little fire was ignited in his heart. The fire grew as Tim became involved in a Christian radio ministry and as he served with a friend named Chad who led a mission to help the poor and needy.

Chad invited Tim to share Thanksgiving dinner with his family in the Sierra Mountains. Twenty minutes into the ride a drunk driver veered into their lane, hit them head on and flipped their van on its roof. Miraculously Tim survived with only a small scratch. A week later, however, Chad died from his injuries. Tim's faith was shattered. Why would God take Chad who loved Jesus and shared the Good News with the poor and prisoners? The answers his Christian friends gave him did not satisfy his aching soul-wrenching questions. So for decades, Tim walked away from his faith. Yet in all that time, Jesus never walked away from him. That small pilot light of the Holy Spirit kept flickering in his heart. And when his journey led him through darker passages, the fire seemed to glow brighter.

For all those years, Tim described himself as a lone ranger who never committed to much. Yet something led him to search for other believers. While acting in a community theater play he met a teen named Tori Vouk from Woodside. Impressed with the way she lived and what she posted on Facebook, Tim suspected Tori was a Christian. Her involvement at Woodside led him to want to know more. Once, when Tim was praying about a difficult situation, his phone received from Tori a link to a Woodside sermon. It turned out to be just what Tim needed and he decided to worship with her and her mom and brother.

Through Tori's invitation, the fire of the Spirit in Tim began to grow. It led him to worship weekly, join a growth group and serve in Habitat for Humanity with others from Woodside. Here Tim found what originally made him want to become a Christian.

It wasn't about going through a ritual or about religion. It was about having a daily, spiritual dynamic experience and I see that happening at Woodside. That's why I finally decided to commit myself to this fellowship.

Tori and you helped rekindle the fire of the Holy Spirit in Tim. You helped him find his way back to God. Let's love God, grow in grace and share with others so many more will come to see the fire of the Spirit burn ever brighter.