

# Ashes to Fire

Sermons by Dr. Russell F. Metcalfe, Jr.

*Permission to reprint or publish Dr. Metcalfe's material is **granted**  
provided that the reprinting or republishing is not-for-profit.*



# Table of Contents

---

<b>Meeting Jesus at the Place of Confession .....</b>	<b>5</b>
CONFESSING IS ONE PLACE WHERE GOD IS NEAR .....	6
CONFESSION—"JESUS IS LORD!"— IS THE 'LAUNCHING PAD TO LIFE' .....	6
CONFESSION IS SIMPLE, YET IT IS GOD-ENABLED! .....	6
CONFESSION IS MORE THAN JUST THE WORDS BEING SAID .....	6
CONFESSION IN THE CHRISTIAN'S LIFE .....	7
CONFESSION IS 'AN OVERCOMING GRACE' .....	7
<b>Believing Have Life .....</b>	<b>11</b>
'BELIEVING' IS A STRONG WORD .....	14
BELIEVING IS THE DOORWAY .....	15
BELIEVING IS MORE— IT IS THE PATHWAY (THE TRAIL) WHERE WE LIVE .....	15
BELIEVING IS STAYING POWER .....	15
<b>Repentance .....</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>The Unfinished Story .....</b>	<b>23</b>
<b>Humility The Root Virtue .....</b>	<b>27</b>
I. HUMILITY AS "A ROOT VIRTUE" .....	29
II. HUMILITY IS A MOVING TARGET .....	29
III. HUMILITY IS A KEY TO KNOWING AND LOVING JESUS .....	31
<b>Veiled Majesty .....</b>	<b>35</b>
I. THE VEILED MAJESTY OF PALM SUNDAY .....	36
II. THIS IS AN UNFINISHED, INCOMPLETE MESSAGE TODAY. ....	36
III. AND ONE DAY THIS PALM SUNDAY MESSAGE WILL BE COMPLETED. ....	37

---

<b>A Story of Faith</b> .....	<b>39</b>
BELIEVING WITHOUT WORDS .....	40
FAITH IN THE GARDEN .....	41
FAITH THAT CAME IN TIME .....	42
<b>Obedience and the Other Witness</b> .....	<b>47</b>
AT THE END OF THE EXODUS .....	47
WE ARE ON OUR WAY TO NEW FULLNESS. ....	50
<b>Reaching Out: The First Breakfast</b> .....	<b>53</b>
<b>A Shepherd and a Promise</b> .....	<b>59</b>
<b>Love: A New Covenant</b> .....	<b>63</b>
<b>Anticipation: Meeting Jesus in the In-Between Times</b> .....	<b>71</b>
<b>Unity: The Countdown to Pentecost</b> .....	<b>75</b>
WHAT OR WHERE IS THIS PLACE WHERE PENTECOST COMES? .....	76
CAN PENTECOST BE REPEATED? .....	76
CAN WE MAKE PENTECOST HAPPEN AGAIN? .....	77
CAN YOU AND I, CAN WE COME TO THE PLACE WHERE PENTECOST COMES? ...	77
THE SPIRIT IS A GIFT OF GOD'S GRACE! .....	77
HOW ONE MAN CAME TO ASSURANCE: .....	78
<b>Fire: Pentecost is the Norm</b> .....	<b>81</b>
PENTECOST IS (ANOTHER) TRANSFORMED JEWISH HOLY DAY .....	82
WHAT HAPPENED THAT FIRST PENTECOST? .....	82
THE NEED FOR PENTECOST TODAY .....	83
PETER'S SERMON .....	84

## Meeting Jesus at the Place of Confession

*ASHES TO FIRE Series 1 of 14*

1. **Meeting Jesus at the Place of Confession**
2. Believing Have Life
3. Repentance
4. The Unfinished Story
5. Humility The Root Virtue
6. Veiled Majesty
7. A Story of Faith
8. Obedience and the Other Witness
9. Reaching Out: The First Breakfast
10. A Shepherd and a Promise
11. Love: A New Covenant
12. Anticipation: Meeting Jesus in the In-Between Times
13. Unity: The Countdown to Pentecost
14. Fire: Pentecost is the Norm

Lent 1—March 1, 1998

*The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart . . . because if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For one believes with the heart and so is justified, and one confesses with the mouth and so is saved. - Romans 10:8b-10*

Beginning today, over the next seven Sundays until Easter, and after that the next seven Sundays until Pentecost, I would invite you to come with me on a journey of intentional and intensive fellowship with Jesus. Each week we will lift just one single, simple point of contact with God in Christ out of the scriptures for a focus. We are assured that if we will draw near to God he will surely draw near to us, and that if we

diligently seek after God He will reward us with Himself. Today the focus of our meeting with Jesus is found in the word confession, and all that that word means.

### **CONFESSING IS ONE PLACE WHERE GOD IS NEAR**

The text says "The word is near you, in your heart, on your lips"

CONFESSING IS ALWAYS GOD-ENABLED (God initiates every meeting with Himself)  
AND YET 'WHOSOEVER WILL' MAY COME !

If you have any desire to God, you are welcome on this wonderful journey!

### **CONFESSION—"JESUS IS LORD!"— IS THE 'LAUNCHING PAD TO LIFE'**

To say "Jesus is Lord!" is the beginning point of an eternal Friendship (but)  
CONFESSION SHOULD ALSO BECOME A WAY OF LIFE "Jesus is Lord!" is not a one-time statement! (We say "I love you!" at the altar when we get married— but that shouldn't be the only time that we say it!!)

### **CONFESSION IS SIMPLE, YET IT IS GOD-ENABLED!**

This verse is wonderful for what it DOES NOT say!

It does not say "If you believe like ME you will be saved ... or If you become a seasoned Christian and get your act together you will be saved . . . or "If you tithe" or "If you join a particular church"

No, it simply says if you (recognize how near God is and) say with your mouth JESUS IS LORD! and (truly) believe in your heart JESUS IS ALIVE: you will be saved!

Romans 12:3 says "No on can say "Jesus is LORD!" in this way except by the Holy Spirit! WHAT DOES THIS MEAN?

### **CONFESSION IS MORE THAN JUST THE WORDS BEING SAID**

More than a creedal confession ( that is necessary) It is a heart confession— it becomes a covenant confession!

CONFESSION IS LIKE THIS:

- Abandonment of all other means of salvation "No other gods!" Jesus is our ONLY Savior!
- Admission of personal inadequacy "I am not my own master— JESUS is Lord!"
- Confession means admitting our need, our sin against God - It will involve "confession" in the other sense of the word
- Confession will mean restitution "confessing Jesus" before those we have wronged . . . paying back what we have stolen; not as a 'works' to earn salvation, but as part of the confession of Jesus as Lord (Zaccheus/ RYR)

### **CONFESSION IN THE CHRISTIAN'S LIFE**

We confess our Lord when we are baptized, and when we take communion; the SACRAMENTS of the church become meeting points; God comes very near!

Testimony and witnessing are also ways in which we confess "Jesus is Lord!" We need to tell other Christians! We also want to tell those who do not yet believe!

Confession is a constant "course correction" to keep us in step with Jesus.

I John 1:9; 2:1,2 is for Christians!

### **CONFESSION IS 'AN OVERCOMING GRACE'**

The Gospel lesson for today is about the wilderness temptation of Jesus. If we believe that story— and with all my heart I tell you that it is true— if we believe that story that Jesus was tempted and overcame by the word of his own testimony then we too, in covenant with Him and by the same power He used and gives us we can overcome sin and temptation in our lives.

Jesus could say "No!" because He had already said a greater "YES!" to the Father's will. He would not break covenant with the Father.

WE can say "No!" to temptation and sin through the power of CONFESSION! When we say "YES!" to God by confessing 'JESUS IS LORD!'

497 "*I'll Live for Him*" is both a prayer to Jesus AND a confession that Jesus is Lord

## Meeting Jesus at the Place of Confession

Confession means abandoning all other hope Confession means covenant Confession means admitting need Confession involves admitting sin Confession includes Confessing Jesus as Lord is one of the holy places where God and man meet.

Every meeting with God is always initiated by Him. Apart from grace we are helpless even to reach out to receive His touch. The way we have confidence to confess Jesus, and draw near to God through him is by the gift of faith.

Confessing faith in Jesus Christ is the launching pad of the journey into life.

If you have any desire, any interest at all, the scriptures make it clear that you're welcome to come and begin to get to know God. This is an adventure on which every one of us is invited. Every one of us has a tiny bit of 'faith' in us— a 'God-responder' that is God's gift.

Confessing Jesus is not human effort or works.

Confessing Christ as Lord comes as a response to the gift of God's love: "God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life." Our scripture text says, "If we believe in our hearts Jesus is alive— and if we say with our mouths that He is Lord, we shall be saved. That is what confessing Christ is.

It seems too simple to say, "Jesus is Lord!" as the basis for our salvation. But in fact it is a miracle of grace when those words are spoken from a God-given faith. The only way we know we can confess Jesus is by this gift of faith. We confess with our mouth, but we believe with our heart. Both of these are involved in confession— the outward testimony and the inward persuasion. If we have been granted the conviction that Jesus came, and died, and rose again for our salvation- - if we truly believe in our hearts that God has raised Jesus from the dead— then that inner persuasion is revealed truth. It is a gift of God.

It seems so simple just to say: Jesus is Lord! And yet a wonderful miracle happens when for the first time someone deliberately says that from the heart. A permanent covenant is established. Jesus Himself said, "I say unto you, everyone who



confesses me before men, the Son of Man shall confess him before the angels of God; but he who denies me before men shall be denied before the angels of God."



## Believing Have Life

*ASHES TO FIRE Series 2 of 14*

1. Meeting Jesus at the Place of Confession
2. **Believing Have Life**
3. Repentance
4. The Unfinished Story
5. Humility The Root Virtue
6. Veiled Majesty
7. A Story of Faith
8. Obedience and the Other Witness
9. Reaching Out: The First Breakfast
10. A Shepherd and a Promise
11. Love: A New Covenant
12. Anticipation: Meeting Jesus in the In-Between Times
13. Unity: The Countdown to Pentecost
14. Fire: Pentecost is the Norm

Lent 2—March 8, 1998

John 20:31 "...and that believing ye may have life through (Jesus') name!"

Last year a group of 34 students from two state universities in Washington State took a study trip into the Amazon jungles of South America. They were led on the last part of their journey by Stephen E. Saint, who happens to be the son of Nate Saint, one of the five Auca martyrs, (Jim Elliot, Pete Fleming, Ed McCulley, Roger Youderian, and Nate Saint,) killed 40 years ago as they tried to make contact with the Aucas, properly now called 'Huaorani'. What has happened since that first day has been a miracle story. This last fascinating glimpse into the miracle was reported in just this week's Christianity Today (3/2/98).

This group of 34 had come to study what they thought would be Stone Age people. Steve Saint has a home among the Huaorani. Some of the very men that speared his father and the others have become like adopted grandfathers to his own children. He has been helping the Huaorani develop ways of raising money for self-sufficiency, and he met this group himself.

The 34 students were taken by jungle bus deep into the forests as far as roads would go, where they were met by three Huaorani men, who led them on a 14-hour hike through jungle trails, followed by a journey in large dugout canoes to a campsite along a jungle river, where they were joined by other members of the Huaorani tribe.

The students quickly learned to respect and enjoy the warmth of the men who guided them. They were welcomed at the camp site, and were so comfortable with their new friends that they asked Steve when they would meet the Stone Age savages they had travelled so far to meet. Steve told them that they had been traveling with them— and they were now surrounded by them. The students did not believe him. So Steve Saint suggested that they ask any of the older people where their fathers might be.

One student took the challenge and nodded to one woman. Steve translated her reply something like: "My father is already dead a long time ago; having been speared he died." Four other Huaorani told the same story. One woman that had really "charmed" the students with her kindness, a very warm and friendly mother of ten, pointed to an old man in the circle: "He hated my family and killed all of them!"

The students were stunned. They had second thoughts about their own safety.

Then Dawa, one of the quietest women spoke up. Pointing at the grandfatherly old man sitting next to Steve Saint she told the students: "He is Kimo. He hating my family speared my father and mother and brothers and sisters and took me for his wife." That really stunned the students. They were deep in the jungle. They had to depend on these people to get them out again. Steve Saint said he thought of what they must be thinking right about then. It occurred to him they didn't know the story we have heard so many times in Christian circles.

Steve put his arm around the old man Kimo's shoulders and told the students, "He killed my father, too." Then there was stunned silence.

At last someone found courage to ask: "What changed these people?"

Steve Saint repeated the question in the language of the Huaorani. The Stone Age people tried to tell the students how it used to be before they changed. They threw babies away when they were a trouble. They buried people alive so their spirits would not be able to return to torment them. Some had strangled their own children with their own hands. But then they tried to explain WHAT THEY BELIEVE about a God they knew as the Man-Maker the missionaries told them about, who had sent his Son to die for people who were full of fear and hate and revenge.

Then Dawa, the wife of Kimo spoke. I quote from Steve Saint's article: "Badly, badly we lived back then," Dawa said. "Now, walking God's trail which he has marked for us on paper (meaning the Bible,) we live well. All people will die, but if living you follow God's trail, then dying will lead you to heaven. But only one trail leads there. All other trails lead to where God will never be after death."

The students were silent. But then Dawa went on to give her own version of an altar call: "Have you heard me well? Which one of you wants to follow God's trail, living well?" The students were silent again— and then one hand was raised.

Steve said that Dawa understood what that raised hand meant, and clapped her hands and said, "Now I see you well. Leaving we will see each other again in God's place some day!" Then she looked at the other 33 and said "Dying I will never see you again if you don't follow God's trail. Think well on what I have spoken so that dying we can live happily together in heaven."

Thirty-four students of anthropology, from Washington State, had traveled thousands of miles into a South American rain-forest to hear from primitive people about the most powerful life changing force in the Universe. They had heard how believing in the God of love and grace can release life-changing power that can only be called miraculous.

The emphasis this week in our intentional and intensive journey into fellowship with Jesus is summed up in this word "believing." The great text is outside our lectionary scriptures (John 20:31) but this is not an isolated, proof-text thing. This "believing" is at the very heart of our faith.

### **'BELIEVING' IS A STRONG WORD**

In our English language "believe" can be a rather weak word. To say "I believe so" sounds a lot weaker than "I know so!" But the word translated "to believe" in both Old and New Testaments, in Hebrew and in Greek, has a much stronger meaning. It is not simply to "think" something, or even to be convinced of propositional truth—but rather it is to trust, to have confidence in, to put a complete reliance in the thing believed.

In Genesis 15:6 we read "Abraham believed God and it was counted to him for righteousness." the word there (aw-man) means 'to trust,' and is also interchangeable with a word that means 'to turn to the right hand.' Trusting means a willingness to change directions

In the New Testament the word is always, 'to commit one's trust to, to have confidence in the thing believed.

BELIEVING IS NOT trying with all your might to make yourself deny the obvious.

Believing is NOT saying "black is white" simply because someone has told you that is what Christians believe. Believing has a lot less to do with analysis and explanations and dogmatic statements about things nobody knows for sure than a lot of Christians feel comfortable admitting. There are people on all sides trying to explain away mysteries who simply have never fully surrendered to Jesus Christ. His loving Spirit is foreign to them.

BELIEVING IS DARING to say to the Christ of the Bible: "I believe You are who You say you are! I hear you say, 'Come unto Me!' Here I am! I believe YOU! I will follow You! If You will be my Lord and Savior, I will be Your man! Your woman! Your boy! Your girl! You be my Savior and my God!" THAT is what believing is about!

## **BELIEVING IS THE DOORWAY**

Trusting Jesus brings us into the real world! In Acts 16 the Roman jailer came to the end of himself— and asked Paul and Silas, "What must I do to be saved?" They showed him the only way: "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved along with your household!"

You can't wait to figure out all the mystery, or explain all the ways a great and holy God 'connects' with finite and sinful you and me. You CAN respond directly to the living Christ as God's gift of faith makes Him real to you.

## **BELIEVING IS MORE— IT IS THE PATHWAY (THE TRAIL) WHERE WE LIVE**

Believing is dynamic. It is never static. It is relational. It contacts and keeps contact. (Genesis 15:6) "In the middle of things" Abraham believed God. He had started out— he had been blessed— but he needed to obey and keep on obeying! We are never saved by "works." But believing enables us TO LIVE differently from the way we were "before." The Huaorani peoples' change was dramatic— they quit killing and feuding. But OUR CHANGE is just as needful— and needs just as much a miracle! We can quit gossiping and hating and being jealous and become "Ephesians 4:32" but only through the power of BELIEVING!

James (chapter 2) comments on this text (from "The Message" by Eugene Peterson):

Isn't it obvious that faith and works are yoked partners, that faith expresses itself in works? That the "works" are "works of faith"? The full meaning of "believe" in the scripture sentence, 'Abraham believed God and was set right with Go,' includes his action. It's that mesh of believing and acting that got Abraham named "God's friend." Is it not evident that a person is made right with God not by a barren faith but by a faith fruitful in works?"

## **BELIEVING IS STAYING POWER**

Psalm 27 closes by saying, "I would have fainted unless I had believed to see the hand of God in the land of the living!" When Abraham was ready to give up he came

with his complaint right back to God! Whenever we are in danger of being overwhelmed we can COME BACK TO GOD HIMSELF!

Wherever you are on your spiritual journey— wherever I am— we have the CHOICE to 'TRUST IN THE LORD WITH ALL OUR HEARTS' or to 'LEAN UNTO OUR OWN UNDERSTANDING!' We can BELIEVE the God who sent His Son to show us the way— OR We can waffle by using some lesser definition of what it means to BELIEVE.

Those thirty-four anthropology students from Washington State traveled thousands of miles to the Amazon rain-forest to hear about the miracle of God's love. They saw fear and hatred and revenge that had been exchanged for love and forgiveness and fellowship.

You and I know that same life-changing power is needed just as much right here where we live! Do you think it is easier to be Christ-like in our society? Where we LOVE THINGS and we USE PEOPLE— where we don't kill (usually) with spears— but we do kill with gossip and uncaring and selfishness.

The power of BELIEVING— in the full sense of trusting, relying on God— can work just that kind of miracle for us, here, as well as the Huaorani people. I Challenge you! This week— In your 'faith' go deeper than simply 'what' you believe (important as that is!) Go directly to God, through Jesus Christ! By faith look him in the face. Say simply, "I will trust you with all I am, now and for ever!"

*437 Trust and Obey*



## Repentance

*ASHES TO FIRE Series 3 of 14*

1. Meeting Jesus at the Place of Confession
2. Believing Have Life
3. **Repentance**
4. The Unfinished Story
5. Humility The Root Virtue
6. Veiled Majesty
7. A Story of Faith
8. Obedience and the Other Witness
9. Reaching Out: The First Breakfast
10. A Shepherd and a Promise
11. Love: A New Covenant
12. Anticipation: Meeting Jesus in the In-Between Times
13. Unity: The Countdown to Pentecost
14. Fire: Pentecost is the Norm

Lent 3—March 15, 1998

*Turning From—Turning To*

Isaiah 55:1-9; Luke 13:1-9; Psalm 63:1-8; 1 Corinthians 10:1-13

The word for this week is "repentance".

Last weekend there was a blizzard over the Midwest and storms in the south. We got four inches of rain here; but it was a near-disaster 800 miles west of here. Chicago had a blizzard, and our church treasurer, Bill Esselstyn had to go out there for a business conference. One effect was that Bill got stranded in a luxury hotel and had to eat French gourmet food for two days.

## Repentance

Bill description of O'Hare airport and the general state of the travelers' distress sounded like a zoo to me. He said some of his co-workers told of being in such violent turbulence that the doors on the overhead compartments flew open and luggage fell out on the passengers. I'm glad I wasn't on that flight.

I thought as I was reflecting on today's scripture lessons— on "repentance"— 'I wonder what sort of prayers were generated in that violently bouncing jet plane?' "Oh God! I'll be different! I promise! I'm sorry for all the sins I've ever done!"

Is that repentance? Would God hear a prayer like that? [He heard Walter S. MacPherson praying in a foxhole in World War I !!] When do you pray a prayer of repentance? Just what is repentance, anyway?

One simple definition I was taught as a young believer is that Repentance is a godly sorrow for sin. And true repentance certainly has that element. But a godly sorrow is more than sorrow over the pain or shame or results of sin— more than remorse for being caught. Repentance is turning away. Repentance always includes a desire to turn away from sin.

In our text today Isaiah cries: "Let the wicked forsake their way, and the unrighteous their thoughts!" Both the Old and New Testament words for "repent" have this concept of a change of direction. (Shuv=OT= disappointment// Metanoia=NT=turning)

Repentance is more than turning away— it is turning to! Isaiah goes on: "Let them return to the Lord, for He will have mercy— and to our God for He will abundantly pardon!"

Repentance FROM sin is never complete until the turning away— the godly sorrow- - "connects" with God's forgiveness and becomes a "turning to" the heavenly father. God stands waiting— ready to tell us we are already pardoned— and we come by the route of repentance— a willingness to turn away - and to turn to! That is how we enter God's family.

But did you know that repentance is not just for unbelievers and sinners? Many people will say, and I am one of them, "I am not a willful sinner! I do not live in known

sin!" With a Wesleyan definition of sin as 'a willful transgression of a known law of God,' we often relegate repentance strictly to the crisis of being saved— we confess and believe and repent once and for all.

But did you know that God's people find revival and renewal when they are willing to live in a spirit of repentance! This world is very much with us, and bangs on us relentlessly day after day. We get so used to living in Sodom and Gomorrah that we need to be careful to listen to the Still Small Voice. When we are careless we often get defensive, or we rationalize— excuse ourselves for our sins of neglect.

Paul sounds four warnings to Corinthian Christians. "Many who left Egypt and experienced God's miracles of the Exodus nevertheless died in the wilderness! WHY? Because they were not living to please God!" Those warnings are 2,000 years old, nearly— but they still call us to repentance:

Don't become idolaters: (7) Anything that threatens to take over our first allegiance we need to recognize as a potential idol— anything we hold so dear that we neglect God: prayer becomes a burden; the gathering together of God's people is easily shunned. Often good things become enemy of God's BEST. Even God's GIFTS cannot take God's place! Is it possible that we need to repent of any attitude that is close to idolatry?

Don't indulge in sexual immorality: (8) God's people are called to purity! Even God's people are tempted by our world to have a casual attitude toward what God intends to be sacred relationships. Statistics tell us that often attitudes of permissiveness and loose morals are inside the church as well as outside. If you are engaging in sexual activity outside of marriage you are sinning! You need to repent!

If you are entertaining and excusing unhealthy thoughts, you need to repent! "Let the unrighteous forsake their thoughts!" — not my sentence— it comes directly from God's Word.

Don't put Christ to the test: (9) is the next warning. Paul is not saying that Christ is not to be trusted in the crunch time. But he is saying that it is possible even to be selfish about the way we live the Christian life! We can seek to use Christ for the

## Repentance

profit we think He brings— or for the health and good feelings we think is the height of spirituality - - or even for climbing the social ladder. If we think more of what Christ can do for us— and never of what we can do for Christ we need to repent!

Finally a sobering warning—

Don't be a complainer!: (10) When whining becomes a way of life we are certainly not where God can bless and use us!! Alongside bank robbing and murder, the sin of complaining and grumbling seems trivial indeed. Maybe you have never been guilty of it. But if we have— we need to repent!

When God's people are willing to turn as the Holy Spirit gently leads them— turn from unhealthy ways and turn to a deeper love of God and one another, then God can get through to us with his Spirit in ways that will surprise and delight us.

Do we ever get beyond the need for repentance? REPENTANCE - AS A WAY OF LIFE - BECOMES HUMILITY BEFORE GOD'S GREAT LOVE

As God walks with His people and they grow in love to Him REPENTANCE BECOMES MORE AND MORE A TURNING TO GOD'S POSSIBILITIES!

Until we get away from thinking of repentance as simply negative, or something to hit people over the head with, we will never find that banquet God is talking about (in Isaiah 55) "Listen carefully to me," God says, "and (you will) eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food!"

What do you suppose God could do with you if He had your full and complete attention? What do you suppose God could do with a congregation that said, "Lord we want to love You more than anything!"??

Deep repentance is NOT some exotic experience. It does not begin with celebration— although we have to celebrate along the way!! It begins with THE DESIRE TO DESIRE God's will above all others. Like Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, this is coming to say, and asking God not to listen to how we feel, but what we are saying: "NOT MY WILL BUT YOURS BE DONE!"

It continues, then, by asking God to help us be OPEN TO GOD's POSSIBILITIES. It is what Bill Bright calls living in the "God room." I'm not always there, I confess. But I want to be led out beyond my own depth! It is what one saint called "being deeply sensitive to the ways and being of God." (Ignatian??)

### **Conclusion**

Would God hear the anguished cry of a person in mortal trouble? Could we call that repentance? Is repentance just a fire escape? When people asked Jesus, "How did those people sin that the Tower fell on?" "What terrible thing did those people do that Herod murdered?" Jesus told the people, "Do you think they were better or worse than you are? Do you think YOU are better than they are?"

I like to think that wherever you are on your spiritual journey God hears the sincere cry for grace. But I don't just want a "fire-escape" salvation! I don't simply want to "turn from" sin in fear of death. God helping me, I want to see us turn TO God. If we will listen for God's voice I believe we can move toward being "deeply sensitive to the ways and being of God!"

### **Prayer**

O Father God, I thank You that You are merciful, and quick to forgive all those who turn to You and who are willing to change their ways. Help us to draw near to You and listen, help us receive your promised gifts of life and blessing. By faith help us to hear Your Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, say to us, "Your sins are forgiven! Come, follow Me!" Amen.

*324 Come, Every One Who is Thirsty*



## The Unfinished Story

*ASHES TO FIRE Series 4 of 14*

1. Meeting Jesus at the Place of Confession
2. Believing Have Life
3. Repentance
4. **The Unfinished Story**
5. Humility The Root Virtue
6. Veiled Majesty
7. A Story of Faith
8. Obedience and the Other Witness
9. Reaching Out: The First Breakfast
10. A Shepherd and a Promise
11. Love: A New Covenant
12. Anticipation: Meeting Jesus in the In-Between Times
13. Unity: The Countdown to Pentecost
14. Fire: Pentecost is the Norm

Lent 4—March 22, 1998

*"Openness"*

Luke 15 1,2; 11-32

### **A Picture, A Story**

The sun has already set and daylight has mostly faded and gone. The big house is dimly outlined between tall old trees against the fading glow in the sky. But there is light piercing out into the darkness from the big house, shining from every window, and from an open door.

There is sound coming from the big house as well as light. It is the sound of music and of people laughing. Dishes are ringing together— it is a party!

## The Unfinished Story

In the foreground of this picture stand two figures silhouetted in the light from the door. Two men are talking. As the light reflects on their faces we can see that they remarkably resemble each other. It is a father and a son. They are in serious conversation.

"I heard you were out here. Why don't you just come on in."

"You know why! \*He's\* in there!"

"He is your brother! You know how I love him. I'm so glad he is home!"

"How could you! love him?"

~ ~ ~

We came in, of course, near the end of this familiar story. The Prodigal Son has gone away, and has come home again. The Loving Father has permitted him to go, but has watched and waited and welcomed him home again with celebration. Now the Elder Brother wonders why.

How could God love like that? Is this really how God loves?

The answer is yes, God loves like that! Love like that is the heart of the Gospel. It is what Jesus is all about. Whoever you are, God loves you. Wherever you are, God's grace can reach you. John 3:16. Grace does not quit.

It is harder to be damned than you might think! You have to fight God's love. His love will follow you. His grace will meet you when you come to yourself. Love "like that" is great when you are a Prodigal Son or Daughter. You can come home again. That is what the story says. We are so familiar with it that we think that maybe that is the whole point of the story. (But do you remember to whom Jesus was telling that story— in fact the three stories of Luke 15?)

Love "like this" is NOT always welcome. It is surprisingly easy to resent it when God's grace goes to work in other people's lives. Resentment and envy and greed can close out the love and the grace that reaches clear around the world. Selfishness



closes the door to God's grace. We think the story is about a son who went away and was lost. But don't you think that the resentful brother was lost, too?

This story tells us that you don't have to run away to be lost. There are people right here, right now who are good people, and who have never caused a scandal, and who have never been in outward rebellion but inwardly they are lost.

We're the good child in the family. We've stayed at home. We deserve to be blessed. It is hard to not be resentful of God's grace at work in others. Doesn't God understand how hard we've worked to be good? Shouldn't we be rewarded for our efforts?

The answer is yes. But we are so often blind to truth that God has already blessed us with his presence in our lives. God is here with us, and always has been, and always will be. In our resentfulness, we fail to recognize this truth. And just about the time we know we are worthy— and certainly a lot more worthy than "those others" we are just as lost as they are!

~ ~ ~

We came in near the end of the story. The two men stand outside, now in darkness so deep the outline of the big house can no longer be seen. The bitterness has been poured out. The loving answer has been given in return. The lights still shine out—the laughter and the music still can be clearly heard.

"You have been here with me— I've been here for you all the time, son."

"You never had a party for me!"

"All that I have is always yours! Come on in!"

And there the story leaves off. This is a story that never really ends. Did the elder brother find grace to open his heart to the joy? Can he open his heart to forgive? Can he open to the possibilities of God?

## The Unfinished Story

Maybe Jesus left the ending up to the Pharisees and scribes that day. Maybe one or two of them was smart enough to see himself in the elder brother and confess and believe and repent and swallow his pride and walk into the light and join the party!

Maybe Jesus left the ending off the story to see if maybe one or two of us is smart enough to see ourselves in the picture! Ernest Campbell said that the biggest problem with American Christianity is that we have a Loving Father Gospel in an Elder Brother Church.

In his wonderful little book about this story Henri J. M. Nouwen says that just maybe, at some time or other, each of us has some of the roles of each person in Jesus' story. I know I was the prodigal, and I know I have been welcomed home. Maybe there have been times I have been able to point someone to the Father, and help another find grace. But maybe, also, I have been closed in vision, closed in spirit- in the unattractive role of the son who stood outside and refused to come in.

The ending of the story, then, could be up to you and me.

### **Prayer**

God of love beyond all our understanding, Through Jesus you enable us to be new people - part of your new creation. You have entrusted us with the task of being ambassadors of Christ. Loving God, we give you thanks for opening our hearts to yours, so that we can speak the words to others which you have spoken to us in Christ: "You are loved. You are forgiven. You are saved." We praise you and adore you, O God, as we pray in Jesus' name. Amen

*#344 Jesus, I Come*

## Humility The Root Virtue

*ASHES TO FIRE Series 5 of 14*

1. Meeting Jesus at the Place of Confession
2. Believing Have Life
3. Repentance
4. The Unfinished Story
5. **Humility The Root Virtue**
6. Veiled Majesty
7. A Story of Faith
8. Obedience and the Other Witness
9. Reaching Out: The First Breakfast
10. A Shepherd and a Promise
11. Love: A New Covenant
12. Anticipation: Meeting Jesus in the In-Between Times
13. Unity: The Countdown to Pentecost
14. Fire: Pentecost is the Norm

Lent 5—March 29, 1998

The word this week: "HUMILITY" Philippians 3

HUMILITY: THE "ROOT VIRTUE" I want to know Christ . . . I have not yet attained "Humility" is the word this week— Confession—believing— repentance— openness— and now—humility!

This may be the hardest sermon to preach there can be! The reason is— we all think we have a measure of humility— and yet humility is so elusive!

In honesty— we all have ego, and plenty of it! (Even "inferiority complex is often simply pride turned inside out— occupation with "self.")

What is this elusive thing called "humility"? I am haunted by a line in an old classic by R Newton Flew, it is on page 411, two-thirds of the way down the page on the right hand side where he says "Indeed it is possible that our worst sins are those of which we are unconscious." We've all known egotists, quarrelsome, selfish people who were altogether unconscious of how they were. Remember the McLandress syndrome?

So I begin with a classic old story I heard years ago, about a little boy was very ill and had an operation and desperately needed a transfusion of whole blood. His big sister, herself just a child, matched his rare blood type. The doctors knew she could spare half a pint, and they asked if she would give her blood to her baby brother. She was naturally quite apprehensive, but still quite readily agreed, for she loved her baby brother very much.

Giving blood is really pretty painless, and the little girl watched every step of the procedure. When it was all over, so the old story goes, she asked, "Now when do I die?" She had thought all along that giving her blood would be the end of her life. She loved her own life— but she had gone outside herself with her love.

It may be that old story is not a perfect illustration of the word "humility." But it comes very close.

### TOWARD A DEFINITION

For humility is a very near relative of agape love, love that can center itself outside the self. Humility is akin to love. It is a climate in which agape love can grow.

Humility is the willingness and the ability to live beyond self-serving. A modern writer, Steven R. Covey, has said, "Humility is the mother of all virtue, courage is the father, the child is integrity, and the grandchild is wisdom." Humility is a willingness to learn. It is openness toward God. Humility is saying 'I am not God, and I will not try to act as though I were.'

Humility is a delicate thing— and believe me, it is not often the central subject of sermon. Just the same, it is almost impossible to over-estimate the importance of

humility. Humility is what I would call a "root virtue." That is, humility is the root out of which other virtues can grow.

## **I. HUMILITY AS "A ROOT VIRTUE"**

You can think of humility as "a root virtue."

- A. There are root sins — sins of the spirit out of which all other sins spring. The violent and disgusting and horrifying sins that make the headlines seem to make sins of the spirit hardly worth mentioning. But the fact remains that in back of every sin that is ever committed are the sins of PRIDE and UNBELIEF. (It is hard to over-estimate the lessons of Genesis 3 and the Garden of Eden!)

PRIDE is the exact opposite of humility. Pride is not just 'healthy self-esteem.' Pride says "I will put my SELF first, ahead of society, ahead of family, ahead of covenants—ahead of God Himself!"

UNBELIEF is the opposite of faith. Unbelief says "I refuse to acknowledge God's Word! It does not apply to me! God can't tell ME what to do!"

- B. But there are also root virtues: virtues out of which all other virtues can grow — they are HUMILITY and FAITH!

HUMILITY is an attitude of OPENNESS — being able to be taught

FAITH is a desire to believe God. It is the willingness to trust God as He makes His Word plain. Root virtues, like root sins, may not be very spectacular. But HUMILITY and FAITH are absolutely vital.

## **II. HUMILITY IS A MOVING TARGET**

The epistle lesson says two big things: (1) Paul wants to know Jesus, and be like him, and (2) Paul does NOT consider himself to have reached the goal.

Philippians 3:10 I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, 11 if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead. 12 Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ

Jesus has made me his own. 13 Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, 14 I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.

However Paul does give us some clear directions in seeking to find these root virtues:

A. I want TO KNOW CHRIST!

This is "teleo"— and means to know a person— not just know about a person— it means getting more and more intimately acquainted. It comes with the same concept as the OT word "to know" that is used for husband and wife— INTIMATELY!

B. I want to know THE POWER OF HIS RESURRECTION!

This is "dunamis"— the living Christ— a guarantee of the importance of LIFE both now, and in the ages to come. The resurrection of Christ, William Barclay says, is the guarantee that life is worth living and the physical body is sacred; it is the guarantee that death is not the end of life and that there is a world beyond; it is the guarantee that nothing in life or death can separate us from (Jesus).

C. I (even) want to know THE FELLOWSHIP OF CHRIST'S SUFFERINGS!

William Barclay says, We share the way Christ walked— we share the cross he bore— we share the death he died— and finally we share the life he lives evermore!

We can come to know Jesus Christ just as surely as we know our friends here on earth. We can come to share our days and nights with Him. We can go beyond theories and book knowledge. By his Spirit, we can say "I know Jesus!" But at the same time we can say, "I am COMING to know Jesus!" We have a long, wonderful way to go!

### III. HUMILITY IS A KEY TO KNOWING AND LOVING JESUS

I believe that HUMILITY enables us sometimes to see what is really important. We live so much to the spectacular— we miss God's grace in life's 'ordinary days.'

It was just an ordinary day— or so it seemed— at the Bethany home of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus— they could not know how near the end of Jesus' earthly ministry. But Mary did NOT miss an opportunity to turn an ordinary day into one the world will never forget!

Do you remember Thornton Wilder's play *Our Town* that you (probably) studied in the tenth or eleventh grade:

Emily Webb Gibbs gets a wish to come back to visit Grover's Corner, New Hampshire, on her twelfth birthday just to observe "an ordinary day:" Here are some words from that old play:

*EMILY (beginning softly but urgently): Oh, Mama, just look at me one minute as though you really saw me. Mama, fourteen years have gone by. I'm dead. You're a grandmother, Mama. I married George Gibbs, Mama. Wally's dead, too. Mama, his appendix burst on a camping trip to North Conway. We felt just terrible about it — don't you remember? But, just for a moment now we're all together. Mama, just for a moment we're happy. Let's look at one another. . . . .*

*And later*

*EMILY: (In aloud voice to the STAGE MANAGER.) I can't. I can't go on. Oh! Oh. It goes so fast. We don't have time to look at one another.*

*(She breaks down sobbing. At a gesture from the STAGE MANAGER, MRS. WEBB disappears.)*

*I didn't realize. So all that was going on and we never noticed. Take me back — up the hill — to my grave. But first: Wait! One more look. Good-by, Good- by, world. Good-by, Grover's Corners . . . Mama and Papa. Good-by to clocks ticking.. . and Mama's sunflowers. And food and coffee.*

*And new-ironed dresses and hot baths. . . and sleeping and waking up.  
Oh, earth, you're too wonderful for anybody to realize you.*

*(She looks toward the STAGE MANAGER and asks abruptly, through her tears.)*

*Do any human beings ever realize life while they live it? every, every minute?*

*STAGE MANAGER: No. (Pause.) The saints and poets, maybe — they do some.*

*EMILY: I'm ready to go back*

Somehow the REAL WORK of the church comes very near when HUMILITY enables us to see the GOOD and even the HOLY in what seem to be ordinary days of our lives.

Am I too mystic here? Am I dreaming?

Judas couldn't understand how a lavish display of love to Jesus could be reconciled with Mary lavished fragrant perfume on Jesus. Judas missed any possible good that could come from such extravagant behavior. The significance was not that this was near the end of the ministry, or that the crucifixion was near— Mary could not have known that. This simply meant that Mary loved OUTSIDE her own little self- - she had been touched by the divine...

## **Prayer**

Closing Hymn

## **Footnote:**

Did you ever hear of the McLandress Coefficient? When I was studying pastoral care many years ago I read about the "McLandress Coefficient;"

Herschel McLandress was a professor of psychiatric measurement at Harvard Medical School, and he developed a way to measure a person's degree of self-absorption. In spoken and written material he measured the use of "I," "me," and



"my" and the "Coefficient" was the longest span of time a person can remain diverted from himself.

Eleanor Roosevelt was supposed to have a McLandress coefficient of two hours; John F. Kennedy's was twenty-nine minutes, and Elizabeth Taylor's was three minutes. The reason I don't dare fill in God's blank check and ask for "power" or "glory" for myself could just be that I need to talk about me, when maybe Jesus wants to talk about something else. How is your McLandress Coefficient?

Could we take the McLandress Coefficient another step, and see how long we can go after getting up in the morning without thinking about God and grace and the love that surrounds us?

Could we even take it further and see how far we might be able to go into the day and week without ever once thinking about the needs of those we meet?



## Veiled Majesty

*ASHES TO FIRE Series 6 of 14*

1. Meeting Jesus at the Place of Confession
2. Believing Have Life
3. Repentance
4. The Unfinished Story
5. Humility The Root Virtue
6. **Veiled Majesty**
7. A Story of Faith
8. Obedience and the Other Witness
9. Reaching Out: The First Breakfast
10. A Shepherd and a Promise
11. Love: A New Covenant
12. Anticipation: Meeting Jesus in the In-Between Times
13. Unity: The Countdown to Pentecost
14. Fire: Pentecost is the Norm

Palm Sunday—April 5, 1998

Luke 19:29,41,45; Revelation 19

### **Intro:**

Passover . . . moments of solemnity and sheer awe . . . hours and days of fun and sheer fellowship. People WALKED great distances to be there . . . TALKED together. SANG the "songs of ascents"

[Ps 122 "I was glad when they said unto me let us go to the house of the Lord"]

Abraham walked up [Zion] with Isaac... David bought Aurauna's threshingfloor there and made an altar ... Solomon built his magnificent Temple there: IT IS AN

INDESCRIBABLE FEELING TO JOIN THE GENERATIONS COMING TO THE HOLY CITY TO MEET WITH GOD.

This Passover was different from all others before or since! ALL the prophecies of ALL the scriptures would focus on a CROSS just five days hence.

THIS IS THE CONTEXT OF THAT TRIUMPHAL ENTRY:

## **I. THE VEILED MAJESTY OF PALM SUNDAY**

(What did Jesus DO ?)

- A. He accepted (imperfect) praise! (1) They anticipated victory they THOUGHT they understood (19:11) (2) They rejoiced in the miracles they had seen (19:37) (3) They could not grasp the great SACRIFICE; the tremendous STRUGGLE; the VICTORY JUST AHEAD!
- B. (19:41) The king showed great compassion; He wept! Because He would be rejected and suffer? NO! Because THEY rejected Him, and THEY would suffer and die!  
  
(Illustration: Note the sheer beauty of Boston - - what do we see? Now, what does Jesus see?)
- C. (19:45) The KING must be JUST!

Here is just a hint of what the CONQUERING KING will do to this universe when our probation TIME is ended! "Temple" does not mean church building (to me;) it means Shekinah— your heart— our worship together!

## **II. THIS IS AN UNFINISHED, INCOMPLETE MESSAGE TODAY.**

ANY PALM SUNDAY MESSAGE IS AN UNFINISHED MESSAGE

- A. JESUS IS STILL ENCOURAGING OUR PRAISE...  
  
...even though it is still incomplete and partial. We THINK we have a handle on the truth— and we DO have the advantage of two thousand years' worth of perspective. By now Tony Campolo's sermon "It's Friday— but Sunday's coming!" is famous...and rightly so! But even knowing now what we know,

and being invited to be a part of Christ's ministry, we are reminded that the story is unfinished! And at the same time...

**B. JESUS IS STILL WEeping OVER THE LOST!**

It is NOT wrong to say that we must praise and be joyful, and at the same time we must have the Lord's compassion and share in His suffering.

**C. JESUS WANTS TO CLEANSE YOUR HOLY PLACE**

...and He wants to cleanse mine! It is important that the temple of our hearts, the place where God's glory can dwell, be cleansed. And when pure hearts come together in worship, THERE is the Church! THEN God's kingdom is carried forward!

**CONCLUSION:**

**III. AND ONE DAY THIS PALM SUNDAY MESSAGE WILL BE COMPLETED.**

One day the whole world will see THE MAJESTY OF JESUS! The Palm Sunday's Triumphal March was followed in five short days by another kind of procession, still led by our King. He was led forth to die! But it is important to remember that Jesus was NO martyr!

In Luke 24 we read that even as He was going to Calvary Jesus said to the people that were crying out and weeping: "Don't weep for Me! Weep for yourselves! Weep for Jerusalem! Weep for those upon whom judgment shall fall!" For Jesus was and is the Lamb of God. The Lamb before Whom the powerful of this earth will flee to the rocks and mountains because of His wrath! The same!

(Revelation 6:16 Cry to the mountains, 'Fall on us! And hide us from the wrath of the Lamb!')

But there is yet to be still another processional!

The story is not finished on Palm Sunday, nor Good Friday— nor even Easter— nor even Pentecost! This same Jesus, who entered Jerusalem on a gentle donkey to the

shouts of children waving palm branches is coming again in a different sort of majesty!

Hear the words from the closing chapters of the Bible:

*(Rev. 19:11-16;22:10-13) And I saw heaven opened, and behold a white horse; and He that sat upon him was called. Faithful and True, and in righteousness he doth judge and make war. His eyes were as a flame of fire, and on His head were many crowns; and he had a name written, that no man knew but he himself. And he was clothed with a vesture dipped in blood: and his name is called The Word of God. And the armies which were in heaven followed him upon white horses, clothed in fine linen, white and clean. And out of his mouth goeth a sharp sword, that with it he should smite the nations: and he shall rule them with a rod of iron: and he treadeth the winepress of the fierceness and wrath of Almighty God. And he hath on his vesture and on his thigh a name written, KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS. And (the angel) saith unto me, Seal not the sayings of the prophecy of this book: for the time is at hand. He that is unjust, let him be unjust still: and he which is filthy, let him be filthy still: and he that is righteous, let him be righteous still: and he that is holy, let him be holy still. And behold I come quickly; and my reward is with me, to give every man according as his work shall be. I AM Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end, the first and the last.*

As we walk with Jesus this Holy Week, as we take Communion with Him Thursday evening, and as we remember Calvary— in it all Jesus is King! And even beyond Easter and Pentecost— remember... one day all this Universe will know and acknowledge the majesty of our KING!

Let us pray:

One day every knee shall bow! Today help OUR tongues to confess that Jesus Christ is LORD, to the glory of God the Father! Amen!

## A Story of Faith

*ASHES TO FIRE Series 7 of 14*

1. Meeting Jesus at the Place of Confession
2. Believing Have Life
3. Repentance
4. The Unfinished Story
5. Humility The Root Virtue
6. Veiled Majesty
7. **A Story of Faith**
8. Obedience and the Other Witness
9. Reaching Out: The First Breakfast
10. A Shepherd and a Promise
11. Love: A New Covenant
12. Anticipation: Meeting Jesus in the In-Between Times
13. Unity: The Countdown to Pentecost
14. Fire: Pentecost is the Norm

Easter Sunday—April 12, 1998  
(April 11, 1993)

*Living Hope*

John 20:9 *He saw and believed.*

*The seeds of life had been sown.*

*Wonderful, living words.*

*Wonderful loving deeds*

*The seeds fell on warm hearts and cold hearts.*

*They fell on good ground and stony ground.*

*And there the seeds of life waited*

*Now the Sower was gone.  
All of a sudden it was winter,  
It was night,  
And it had never been this dark, this bleak,  
Ever, ever before*

*Then, suddenly the Sun came up,  
And it was springtime.  
Some of the seeds began to feel the stirrings of life.  
Some of the seeds knew they must respond.*

The WORD was calling them to LIFE!

### **BELIEVING WITHOUT WORDS**

The first person to believe in the Risen Savior was John the Beloved. His coming to this living faith is stated in just four words. He saw and believed. (8)

John is modest to a fault. He never calls himself by name throughout the book. But he does not deny what happened in his heart when he looked into the empty tomb. He had not yet even seen the risen Jesus. That would come later, and John would meet Jesus again and again. John's vision of the glorified and risen Jesus would finally surpass every vision, at least until we all behold Him face to face.

But that first beginning is recorded so simply that it is easy to pass over as insignificant. John saw and John believed.

John saw what? The empty tomb. The empty grave-clothes. And that was all John needed. He remembered Jesus had said, "I will rise again the third day!" He remembered Jesus had said, "I will not leave you comfortless!" The seed has been planted in pure and fertile soil, and a miracle took place: John believed! That was it!

Mary's revelation is so much more dramatic. A sinner, a notorious sinner, she was the first to see the Savior! But John was good ground. The seed had lodged well.



John stands for millions of believers who have been implanted with the Good Seed of the Gospel before they ever came to rebellion, or before they knew enough to doubt.

John stands for many who know that Jesus is alive long before they reach the age of full understanding.

John stands for those who are so inclined to believe in Jesus that they know even before they know HOW they know! And never despise such faith! It will mature. It will be tested. It will have its revelations.

John was first!

### **FAITH IN THE GARDEN**

The first person to see the risen Savior was a woman. She was without doubt a remarkable woman, with a strong character that had been refined and prepared for faith by the redeeming grace of Jesus. Her past keeps coming back to us; when she first met the Nazarene she had been possessed of seven devils. Jesus had set her free, and she had been a part of the faithful few that went all the way to the cross with Him.

But after the crucifixion Mary came to a dead stop. Her life was totally circumscribed by a visible, tangible Authority. She would gladly have died for Him, but she had not fully grasped how He had died for her! Her hope was in a living Messiah. And she had seen Him die on a cross.

She loved Him so much she wanted to go as far as she could in showing Him respect and honor. But all the words He had spoken, and all the things He had done were history now. Except that she still was free of the demons.

She went to honor a dead Jesus, but she went with love. And the hunger and cry and aching of her heart were answered in a way she never could have imagined. It is one of the most beautiful scenes in all holy writ.

Jesus, Himself, came to the Garden where she was. He came near and spoke her name. "Mary!" And within her the dormant seed of faith sprang to life!

"Master!"

Mary stands for the millions who have come to faith through love of a Christ they have been seeking. Perhaps we all have sought in the wrong places at times for Jesus. It may be that we have "supposed" and have almost mistaken the truth in the error of our suppositions. And then the living, risen Savior has spoken our name! I know you! And you know Me, too!

Mary stands for those who go looking with love for the Master.

### **FAITH THAT CAME IN TIME**

It was a different kind of 'coming to faith' that John used for the very climax of his Gospel.

Thomas was a man who missed church on the first Easter Sunday. Perhaps if he had been there it might have been different. But it wouldn't have been so good for you and me if we didn't know this story of Thomas.

Thomas seemed to be that sort of person who is cursed with a gloomy outlook on life. But at the same time he seemed to be as honest as he knew how to be.

Remember how at a time late in Jesus' ministry when Jesus said He was going to Jerusalem, and the other disciples tried to tell Jesus not to go, that it was dangerous? Remember who spoke up, and what he said? It was Thomas who said, "Well, let's go with Him and die!" He loved Jesus enough to follow Him even when he, Thomas, thought He was probably wrong!

Anyway, Thomas didn't see, so he wouldn't believe. I get the idea that Thomas didn't dare to try to believe, because he didn't want to be disappointed again. And besides, Thomas couldn't see how things had changed. They were still a powerless little band of outsiders in their society.

Thomas represents honest doubt. Thomas stands for millions who have been persuaded that all religions are made of smoke and mirrors, and that believing in an unseen God probably is delusion. (Who was it that said an agnostic is a person with no invisible means of support?)

Thomas would like Jesus to prove to him personally that He is relevant in a hostile world.

One thing comes through in this story. Jesus really loved Thomas. He may have been stubborn. He may have been unable to join in the celebration because he couldn't believe what he hadn't seen. Jesus still loved Thomas.

And Jesus found Thomas. And when Jesus came to where Thomas was, the arguments Thomas had insisted he would make were never made!

"Come, put your hand in my side!", said the Savior. Thomas never did! Instead he fell to his knees. The seed of faith sprang to life!

"My Lord and my God!" said Thomas.

It is a wonderful thing to know the story of Jesus. It is a wonderful thing to come to love Him and to believe in Him as the Christ of the Bible. Jesus said that the Good News of the Gospel is the Seed of Life, and to know about Jesus is to receive that seed into the heart.

But it is an infinitely more wonderful thing to believe! To believe, to be persuaded deep in one's heart that Christ is alive, and to make Him our own personal Lord and Savior.

Believing, in this sense, does not come from knowing more and more. Believing does not come by winning arguments, or human understanding. Believing comes when people meet the risen Jesus!

A church where Jesus is alive can be a place where Jesus meets with people, and brings the seeds of faith to life. A heart where Jesus lives can take the risen Savior to neighbors at school or in the work place. God help you and me to let the living Savior shine through our lives!

Whether we are like John, or like Mary, or like Thomas, if we will let Him, Jesus will come to where we are. He will speak the word that calls our seeking to a living faith: we can believe!

*Now the Sower was gone.  
All of a sudden it was winter,  
It was night,  
And it had never been this dark, this bleak,  
Ever, ever before.*

*Then, suddenly the Sun came up,  
And it was springtime.  
Some of the seeds began to feel the stirrings of life.  
Some of the seeds knew they must respond.  
The WORD was calling them to LIFE!*

StL #261 *Christ is Risen, Christ is Living*

StL #262 *He Lives*

StL #264 *Thine is the Glory*

Almighty God, who through thine only-begotten Son Jesus Christ hast overcome death and opened to us the gate of everlasting life: Grant that we, who celebrate with joy the day of the Lord's resurrection, may be raised from the death of sin by thy life-giving Spirit; through the same Jesus Christ our Lord, who liveth and reigneth with thee and the same Spirit ever, one God, world without end.

### **Postscript:**

This week in the US, PBS carried 4 hours of programming on the rise of Christianity from the 1st to the 4th Centuries CE. The programs began with the statement (as the camera pans through a Gothic style church): Every Sunday, in every corner of the world, people gather to hear a story. For nearly two thousand years that story has been told and retold . . . .

- HOW DO WE KNOW JESUS ROSE?
- WHAT DIFFERENCE DOES IT MAKE?
- HOW CAN OTHERS KNOW JESUS IS ALIVE?

Several years ago a group of salesmen went to a regional sales convention in Chicago. They assured their wives that they would be home in plenty of time for Friday's supper. One thing led to another and the meeting ran overtime so the men had to race to the airport, tickets in hand. As they barged through the terminal, one man inadvertently kicked over a table supporting a basket of apples. Without stopping they all reached the plane in time and boarded it with a sigh of relief. All but one. He paused, got in touch with his feelings, and experienced a twinge of compassion for the girl whose apple-stand had been overturned. He waved goodbye to his companions and returned to the terminal. He was glad he did. The ten-year-old girl was blind. The salesman gathered up the apples and noticed that several of them were battered and bruised. He reached into his wallet and said to the girl, "Here, please take this ten dollars for the damage we did. I hope it didn't spoil your day." As he started to walk away, the bewildered girl called out to him, "Are you Jesus?" (1)

(1) Reference

1. *Are You Jesus?* By Brennan Manning. From *More Sower's Seeds, Second Planting*, copyright 1994 by Brian Cavanaugh, T.O.R., p. 13. Paulist Press, Mahwah, NJ 07430.



## Obedience and the Other Witness

*ASHES TO FIRE Series 8 of 14*

1. Meeting Jesus at the Place of Confession
2. Believing Have Life
3. Repentance
4. The Unfinished Story
5. Humility The Root Virtue
6. Veiled Majesty
7. A Story of Faith
8. **Obedience and the Other Witness**
9. Reaching Out: The First Breakfast
10. A Shepherd and a Promise
11. Love: A New Covenant
12. Anticipation: Meeting Jesus in the In-Between Times
13. Unity: The Countdown to Pentecost
14. Fire: Pentecost is the Norm

April 19, 1998

*And we are witnesses of these things; and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him. Acts 5:32*

### AT THE END OF THE EXODUS

God's chosen leader-successor to Moses, Joshua, led the Israelites into Canaan, the Promised Land. By a miracle very much like the miracle that delivered them from Egypt, the waters of the Jordan, swollen at flood level, had parted while the entire young nation marched across into land in which Abraham had sojourned. It was a thrilling time. Joshua was being brave and very courageous, as he had been told by God to be.

But just at this time Joshua met God in a new way. In a new, unrecognized form God met Joshua along the way— as a man with a drawn sword. Joshua, in his boldness asked this wonderful being "Are you for us? or are you for our adversaries?" It is something we would all like to know. Is God on our side?

Now God is "for" every man and woman on the face of the earth, in that God loves us, and He wills life and goodness for us. But God is not "for" any person or group of persons in serving their goals, being "used" to bring about health, and wealth, and success. As Abraham Lincoln wisely said, "I am not concerned if God is on our side; I am concerned that I be on God's side."

Joshua got this answer:

No! As the captain of the Lord's hosts I have come!

Joshua immediately did the right thing. He realized he was in God's presence. He fell on his face and worshiped. The God spoke to Joshua in much the same way he had called Moses more than 40 years before, from the burning bush. "Take your sandals off your feet! You are in God's Presence! This is holy ground!"

Joshua was being fine tuned for obedience here. Joshua was God's choice as leader, but Joshua was not to be calling the turns. Joshua was not himself to be "in charge." Joshua was learning that his power was only in his obedience to God's revealed will.

Just a few days later in the next chapter or so of this history is the famous battle that is still celebrated in spiritual and song— the battle of Jericho. It was a strange campaign, that. You know the story— marching around the walls in silence seven days. The seventh day multiple marches and then sudden blowing of the ram's horns. It was a miraculous victory that put the fear of God into the enemies of Israel. Once again success was dangerous, however. For the very next battle was against a small tribal kingdom called Ai. This enemy army was so small that just a few regiments were sent to bring them under control.

But instead of smashing victory there was shameful defeat. The reason, as it was discovered, was that among the soldiers was willful disobedience and defiance of God's will. A man called Achan had deliberately kept spoils to his personal use. God



refused to bless the efforts of the Israeli army until they had repented and returned to the ways of obedience.

What Joshua learned that day as he met the Captain of the Lord's hosts was that obedience is what wins the day! It pays to stay in touch with God— in tune with His will.

Fifteen-hundred years later this principle was still very much in force. In obedience to Christ's command the disciples waited in Jerusalem and the Holy Spirit came on the day of Pentecost and filled them with power. The very first day it was not the walls of Jericho, but the gates of hell that were shaken, as 3,000 souls entered the kingdom under the preaching of Peter and the witness of the 120 spilling out of the Upper Room.

The disciples had their set-backs. They didn't have an Achan in the Early Church, but they did have Ananias and Sapphira, who lied to the Holy Spirit, and lost their lives because of their wrong spirit. But as long as the disciples were careful to seek and obey God's leading, they were unstoppable.

In the passage read this morning, the disciples have been arrested and warned—they have been arrested again and jailed— they have been set free by God's intervention, and have gone back to the Temple area to preach again about the resurrection power of God in Jesus Christ. As they obey God they are unstoppable!

Brought before the authorities they are commanded again not to speak in Jesus' name. Then comes this text. WE MUST OBEY GOD, RATHER THAN HUMAN AUTHORITY!

Now 2,000 years later it speaks the truth to us in our march from "Ashes to Fire!" This text says four important things:

1. We must obey God, not human authority. We need to believe that what we are doing is God's will. We don't ask God's blessing on OUR ideas and plans— instead we submit our will to HIS.

2. We are speaking what we have experienced. "Witnesses" can only say what they know for themselves. Our "witness" has to be first-hand: MY sins have been forgiven. MY life is being changed! Jesus Christ IS MY Lord!
3. The Holy Spirit is validating our witness. When we try to tell others about Jesus we can be sure that we are NOT alone! The Holy Spirit Himself backs up testimony! HE is what gives witness power to reach into hearts and change lives!
4. The Holy Spirit is given to those who obey him. Here is the KEY! The "Other Witness"—the Holy Spirit—is given to those who actively, deliberately are OBEYING God!

### **WE ARE ON OUR WAY TO NEW FULLNESS.**

We are walking with Jesus from "Ashes to Fire!" We have believed. We have confessed. We have repented.

We have sought to be open and transparent before God. We have prayed for true humility. We have followed Jesus to the Cross, and we have rejoiced in his resurrection power. BUT WE AREN'T THERE YET! There is greater fullness ahead!!

We may be tempted to "use" these steps to "improve" our way of life—to make us "better people"—to fulfill our goals. God, are you with us? Are you for us? Will you help us do as we think You should?

The response is the same as it was to Joshua 3,500 years ago: "Come to holy ground! Know Me! Obey me! You will be MY witnesses! And so will the Holy Spirit through you!"

What sort of obedience is God seeking? We may be surprised in that God is not always promoting BIG and DRAMATIC scenes for us. God begins with the inner life:

Are you living in any known sin? Do you have unconfessed sin in your life? Is there someone who has wronged you that you have not forgiven? Do you secretly harbor hatred in your heart? Do you entertain lustful thoughts? Do you look at or read filth?

God can not bless us, no matter how gifted, or how doctrinally true or eloquent, if we are speaking from disobedient lips!

The "Other Witness"— God's Holy Spirit— is ready and waiting to work with us to carry forward the work of Christ in our homes, in our neighborhoods— through the work of this church! He is more loving, more powerful, more capable than we will ever be.

But that "Other Witness" will only come where we are willing to OBEY GOD!

**Prayer**

O Father God— we want to know You better. Whatever the cost, help us to be your people. Do with us what you will, only teach us to please you and do your will. We ask this in Jesus' name, who with the Holy Spirit lives and reigns with you, one God, forever and ever. Amen

Hymn 329 *Is Thy Heart Right with God?*



## Reaching Out: The First Breakfast

*ASHES TO FIRE Series 9 of 14*

1. Meeting Jesus at the Place of Confession
2. Believing Have Life
3. Repentance
4. The Unfinished Story
5. Humility The Root Virtue
6. Veiled Majesty
7. A Story of Faith
8. Obedience and the Other Witness
9. **Reaching Out: The First Breakfast**
10. A Shepherd and a Promise
11. Love: A New Covenant
12. Anticipation: Meeting Jesus in the In-Between Times
13. Unity: The Countdown to Pentecost
14. Fire: Pentecost is the Norm

Annual Meeting Sunday—April 26, 1998

Acts 9; John 21

Our God is a bridge builder. In all his thoughts and actions toward us he is reaching out to let us know that in this vast and mysterious universe we are not alone. In the first pages of scripture God is seen as looking for Adam and Eve in the Garden, calling, reaching out. The final words of Revelation are reaching out words: "The Spirit and the Bride say, 'Come! And let anyone that hears say, 'Come!' And let anyone that is thirsting come! Whosoever will, let them take of the water of life freely.'" Those are bridge-building words!

God wants his people to be bridge builders as well. If we want to be better friends to God we can learn from Him to reach out. It is God-like not simply to "win souls," but to "be there" for others with God's caring love.

Our scriptures today tell the stories of two bridges being built. The first story is about a man who had already met Jesus, but now he was potentially the loneliest man in the world. If Saul became a Christian his old friends would hate him— even kill him. But Saul had been so vicious the Christians felt they could never trust him. For three days Saul of Tarsus sat in a daze in a house on Straight Street absolutely in the dark. Then along came a bridge builder named Ananias, who lived in the ancient city of Damascus, Syria.

It is easy to read the Book of Acts and see the stars. Peter and Paul dominate the action, and there is no doubt they were the stars- they were great! But it is also easy to read the Book of Acts and overlook the bridge builders. If it weren't for a praying church, and a house prayer meeting, and a big-hearted disciple named Barnabas, and faithful martyrs like James and Stephen there wouldn't have been any stars. When God was reaching out to Paul he used a bridge builder named Ananias.

Ananias was in touch with God; he was "connected." God called his name: "Ananias!" The answer came back immediately! "Present! Here I am!"

"I have an assignment for you! Over at Judas' house on Straight Street is a man named Saul. He needs a man like you!"

Ananias loved and trusted God. He could (in a sense) argue lovingly with Him. "Is this really what YOU want me to do? You know who this Saul of Tarsus is!" God gave him assurance; this was what Ananias was to do.

Ananias was absolutely obedient when he knew it was God's will. There was no hesitation once it was established: this is God's will! Sanctifying grace will do that for you— it takes the "Shall I do God's will?" question, and replaces it simply with "What IS God's will?" It is already settled that there will be obedience!

Ananias carried through in spirit as well as letter. "Brother Saul!" And before Ananias was through Saul-Paul was "connected" to the believers. Another bridge-builder took

over later, a man named Barnabas. If there had not been a bridge builder, a person to "reach out", Paul could not have become the great missionary he became.

God needs great men like Peter and Paul. But in his providence he doesn't anoint many apostles. There simply aren't many Billy Grahams and Chuck Colesons. And maybe the church has as many as it can use. They are the "stars." But the church desperately needs more men and women like Ananias of Damascus, and Barnabas the Son of Consolation. It needs people who are willing to build bridges— to reach out with God's love, to go one-on-one with people who are trying to find their way. We have some people like that right here this morning! Thank God!

(I was blessed this morning as I thought of people in this church who have been bridge builders: Carol Mann, Loretta Fish, Lois Howard, Esther Sanger; I thought across the years to people who have been for me like Barnabus and Ananias: Walter Edsall, George Anderson; you have had them, too; maybe you have been there for others as well . . .as a church we are called to that sort of ministry.)

—

The second reaching out story is a fishing story. Well, it starts out about fish, but it sort of ends up about sheep. It is one of the most beautiful stories in the Bible. It is a sort of add-on after the climax of the Gospels and Thomas' confession of Jesus: "My Lord and my God!" and John put it there to show how Jesus is at building bridges.

The disciples had gone back to Galilee as Jesus had told them. No Jesus. After a few days Peter declared, "I'm going fishing!"

I don't fault Peter one bit for going fishing. It doesn't mean he didn't love Jesus. It doesn't mean he wasn't willing to do the right thing. Fishing is an exercise in hope, when you come to think of it. Like McCawber in David Copperfield, the true fisherman always is saying down in his heart, "Something will turn up!" And besides that people have to eat. So Peter and six others went fishing. They fished all night. And something did turn up. Or I should say, Someone.

It may have seemed unreal at first. Three years before they had fished all night long and caught nothing. Then a non-fisherman— a Carpenter, had told them to push out

into the deep and let down their nets for a draft. Now once again after fishing all night without catching a single fish they see this solitary Figure on the shore who calls, "Cast your nets on the other side of the boat!" And immediately they have several hundred pounds of very lively fish in their nets. One-hundred-fifty-three big ones, to be precise. And believe me, every fisherman knows exactly how big, how many, what bait, and where!

From a hundred yards offshore John recognized the Stranger. "It is the Lord!" With that Peter grabbed a tunic and over the side he went swimming and wading ashore. He was so glad to see Jesus! But then just about the time he stepped out of the water Peter remembered. He had let Jesus down. In his time of greatest pain he had denied that he ever knew Jesus. Peter wondered what to say, and so he just turned and helped pull the heavy nets on shore.

If the Passover that was transformed into a sacrament is called "The Last Supper," maybe this story ought to be called, "The First Breakfast." It says a lot without words to think that the risen Lord of the Universe would meet seven tired and hungry fishermen with a hot bed of coals for a delicious morning fish fry. You might say we have a Savior who comes to breakfast. But the bridge building, the reaching out—that is what this chapter is really about.

After breakfast Jesus called Peter a little way apart from the rest. Nosy John tagged along, and I'm glad he did for several reasons. John heard Jesus ask Peter, "Simon, son of John, do you (still) love me more than these (other fellow disciples)?"

The competitive spirit, at least against his fellow Christians, had gone from Peter. Chastened he answered, "Lord, I am your loving friend!"

Jesus came back: "Feed my lambs!" There are tender hearts who need your redeemed, restored ministry.

Jesus bored in again, "Simon, do you love me?"

A little more quietly, a little more subdued, Peter responds: "Lord, you know that I love you!" "Feed my sheep," came back the command again.



But Jesus was building a strong bridge to Peter. A third time Jesus came back, this time in Peter's own word for love: "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" And this time Peter is totally broken. He knows Jesus has forgiven him. He understands a little of the great love that is reaching out to where he is right now. I am certain tears were flowing as Peter said the third time, "Lord, you know all things: you know that I love you!"

Jesus did not deny Peter's statement. But again he came back as if to say, "The only way you are going to prove that love to me is by caring for my sheep!" And then Jesus told Peter there would come a time when he would prove that love even by dying for Him. It was a sobering moment.

(Incidentally, a modern-day Christian teacher, the late Henri Nouwen left a tenured position at Harvard University and became a servant to severely retarded people on the strength of that challenge in verse 18 to Peter.)

The bridge was built. Jesus had reached out. Contact! But the story was not quite over. For John had tagged along. John had gotten Peter into the high priest's courtyard the night Jesus was arrested. John had run away, too. John didn't seem to need a bridge. Peter was human. He asked, "What about him, Lord?"

Peter heard the final word— for him and for us. "What is that to you? You follow ME!" And that is exactly what Peter did. His call was renewed. the fisherman became a bridge builder. He spent the rest of his life reaching out. He became a mighty preacher and soul winner. He became a representative of Jesus in healing miracles— even raising one young lady from the dead.

God needs us to be bridge builders, people who will reach out. Jesus will meet with us at the place of reaching out in fellowship to one another within the church. And he certainly will meet with us at the place where we are willing to reach out to those who do not yet know this Savior.

We are not saved in order to shut and lock the door against the world, circle the wagons and wait for the Rapture. We have been reached by grace so that we, too,

## Reaching Out: The First Breakfast

can be bridge builders. Wherever God sends us, he will meet us and go along with us. We meet him at the place of reaching out.

**Prayer** - Lord in some small measure we have sought to reach out to our brothers and sisters, and to those in our community who may not yet know you, and by prayer and faith, to reach out even around the world. grant to us that we can be like You, bridge builders— bringing your body together in love, we pray in Jesus' name. Amen

*702 Christ for the World We Sing*

## A Shepherd and a Promise

*ASHES TO FIRE Series 10 of 14*

1. Meeting Jesus at the Place of Confession
2. Believing Have Life
3. Repentance
4. The Unfinished Story
5. Humility The Root Virtue
6. Veiled Majesty
7. A Story of Faith
8. Obedience and the Other Witness
9. Reaching Out: The First Breakfast
10. **A Shepherd and a Promise**
11. Love: A New Covenant
12. Anticipation: Meeting Jesus in the In-Between Times
13. Unity: The Countdown to Pentecost
14. Fire: Pentecost is the Norm

May 3, 1998

John 10:11-33; Psalm 23

Our Faith is about:

David says "The LORD is my shepherd . . ."

Jesus says, "I AM the Good Shepherd." "I lay down my life for my sheep. No one can pluck them out of my hands."

Such a PERSONAL thing! "MY" shepherd! Our faith begins and ends with Jesus! In the latest Christian Century is an article about being apprenticed to Jesus. We can tell whether our faith is on bedrock or "on stilts" if the emphasis is on Jesus! more than it is on secondary issues.

## A Shepherd and a Promise

A valley and a presence:

In reality we are not always "up." "I shall not want" does not mean we will never go through valleys. Scary places. Dangerous places. But there is that promise: "I know that you will be with me! I know that you ARE with me!" "No one can pluck me out of your hand!"

A table and enemies:

When we are in the valley— when the pressure is on— the Lord has promised to feed us— to sustain us. (Of course he feeds us when we're picnicing on the mountainside as well. But feed us He does! That's His job!)

Our "enemies" will see this. It is not a "nah-nah-nah-nah-nah!" flaunting— eating in the presence of enemies. Rather it is being held, sustained—maintaining a love and Christ-like caring that the "enemies" can see!

Wherever you are on your Spiritual Journey the Presence is available to you. God's table can sustain you. Today's place of meeting Jesus in our Ashes to Fire is "Wounded Healers." We meet Jesus when we share His table before our enemies; we meet Jesus when we are at our strongest and share with others. But perhaps we meet Jesus more than we can ever know when we share our faith with others when we are at our very lowest- our weakest.

Barbara Howard's death left a fragrance; was a renewal—almost a revival!

I invite you to covenant again with Jesus at His table:

### **THE HOLY COMMUNION**

Wherever you are on your Spiritual Journey:

If you believe God is seeking fellowship with you— and if you want to turn to Him, I invite you to come in faith to the Table of the Lord. Draw near with faith and take this Sacrament to your comfort, and make your humble confession to Almighty God in humility before Him.

**(The Apostles Creed — #8 in Sing to the Lord)**

## **The Law Read and Confession Made**

The Lord Jesus Christ has said to us: "Thou shalt love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the first and great commandment. The second is like unto it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets." Brothers and sisters, let us search our hearts. In silence let us ask God to draw us near to Himself so that we can come to his table with confidence.

(Reading No. 750 — A prayer in unison, from scripture:)

**Unison:** Search me, O God, and know my heart; Test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me. Lead me in the way everlasting.

Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love. Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin. Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, O Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer.

**Pastor:** Hear what our Lord has said: Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. And he has also said, "God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son that whosoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life.

Thank you. O God, for your forgiving us when we come humbly to you. We do not presume to come to this table, O God, trusting in our own righteousness, but in your great mercy and grace. Grant us to eat the Bread of heaven, and drink the blood shed for the remission of sins, that we may live in Christ, and Christ may live in us forever. Amen

(In Place of Gloria Patri ) sing

"Father, I Adore You, Lay my life before You How I love you!"

"Jesus, I adore you . . ." and : "Spirit, I adore you . . ."

## **The Informal Invitation**

("This is not my table . . ." Do not come irreverently. Do not come because someone else expects it. But if the Host invites you, and you want to walk with Him, then you are welcome at His table... )

### **The Words of Institution**

On the night in which he was betrayed our Lord Jesus Christ took bread; and when he had given thanks to You he broke it and gave it to his disciples and said, "Take eat: THIS IS MY BODY, which is given for you. Do this for the remembrance of me.

After supper he took the cup and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, and said, "Drink this, all of you; THIS IS MY BLOOD OF THE NEW COVENANT, which is shed for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins. Whenever you drink this, do it in remembrance of me: Amen

We praise you for the mystery of our salvation! We truly believe Christ has died!  
Christ is risen! Christ will come again!

Bless these emblems, O God, and make them to us the Body and Blood of your Son, spiritual food, and spiritual drink of new and unending life in Jesus Christ.

And now, together, we pray, as Jesus taught us: Our Father which art in heaven . . .

Now, humbly we receive the Gifts of God for the People of God

## Love: A New Covenant

*ASHES TO FIRE Series 11 of 14*

1. Meeting Jesus at the Place of Confession
2. Believing Have Life
3. Repentance
4. The Unfinished Story
5. Humility The Root Virtue
6. Veiled Majesty
7. A Story of Faith
8. Obedience and the Other Witness
9. Reaching Out: The First Breakfast
10. A Shepherd and a Promise
11. **Love: A New Covenant**
12. Anticipation: Meeting Jesus in the In-Between Times
13. Unity: The Countdown to Pentecost
14. Fire: Pentecost is the Norm

May 10, 1998

John 13:31-35

There are many ways to look at Mother's Day. I see it as an opportunity to celebrate family love. It doesn't have to just be birth mothers that we honor. At least we can think again about how important our loved ones are to us.

Children often see things a little differently from what we might think. David Heller wrote a book called *DEAR GOD: CHILDREN'S LETTERS TO GOD*. He eavesdrops on some children's prayer-letters in which they talk about family. For example:

Dear God, Thank you for my parents, my sister Anita, and for my grandma

and grandpa. They are real warm and special. I forgive you for my brother Phil. I guess you didn't finish working on him. Sean (age 12)

Dear God, My mom is acting weird because she is getting old. Can you take back a few gray hairs? That would help bring back the house to normal. Thanks for what you can do. Mike (age 9)

Dear God, You light up my life. So do mom and dad. I hope you like this. I am not sure what it means. Luv, Toni (age 7)

Dear God, My mom tells me a story about you every night. Last night she told me how you always remember your mother on her birthday. And you give her divine gifts. I think she was kidding me and herself. Love, Holden (age 7)

In my early years we always had carnations on Mother's Day. We may not have had any money, but my mother saw to it that my sister Ruth and I had red carnations to show OUR mother was alive— and she and Dad wore white carnations in honor of their mothers who had died. It seemed somehow sacred and "official"— that was the way to observe Mother's day.

Mother's Day still is a good way to honor all that is best about mother love and family love. But it has to be much more than carnations and cards. Anna Jarvis, the West Virginia woman whose crusading got her state to adopt Mother's Day in 1910, and the whole nation to adopt by 1914 later became very bitter over the heavy commercialization of Mother's day. She told a reporter she was sorry she ever started Mother's day. In fact she was arrested for disturbing the peace at a War Mother's Rally when she protested the sale of carnations. "This is not what I intended," she was quoted as saying. "I wanted it to be a day of sentiment, not profit."

Mother's Day is an opportunity to honor far more than just birth mothers. Anna Jarvis herself, the founder of Mother's Day, never was a birth mother. And one of the most beautiful real-life stories in our nation's history was about a boy who was born in Kentucky, moved early to southern Indiana where his mother died. When his father



brought home a new bride the little boy was very upset, almost frantic. He didn't want to accept a step-mother. he was afraid he would forget his birth mother.

But the boy's step-mother was a kind Christian woman. She read to him every night. She nursed him when he was sick, and held him on her lap a lot. As time went by he came to realize he could love this new mother without losing his love for the mother who had died. He came to call his step mother his "Angel Mother." Later on Abraham Lincoln would say, as 16th President of the United States, "All that I am or ever hope to be I owe to my angel mother."

This day of celebration of family love falls on the 11th Sunday in our Ashes to Fire Pilgrimage with Jesus, and is the day when we hear His greatest commandment— what some call, "The Eleventh Commandment." "A new commandment I give you," Jesus said, "That you love one another."

In two brief sentences that commandment is spoken three times, just to make sure the disciples would hear and understand.

First Jesus said it: This is my command! Love one another!

Then Jesus told them HOW they should go about it: As I have loved you, so you are to love one another! Like Jesus! As He loved!

Finally Jesus told them that this was to be their identification badge: By THIS, He said— by THIS shall all know that you are MY disciples— if you have love one for another!

Wonderful are the steps we have been following— we began with believing, then confessing, then repenting. We went on with openness or vulnerability before God, with humility, and to complete surrender. We rejoiced in the resurrection, and went on to obedience, and to reaching out to others. last Sunday night we talked about wounded healers. but now we are at the heart of the whole scheme: WE ARE TO LOVE ONE ANOTHER AS JESUS HAS LOVED US!

This is on a different plane now even from The Golden Rule. Jesus is not saying, "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you!" He is saying, "Love one another

as I have loved you!" He has just finished washing his disciples' feet. He is about to die on the cross of Calvary for their sins, and for yours and mine as well. And he says to them and to us: LOVE ONE ANOTHER AS I HAVE LOVED YOU.

This kind of self-giving love is what soul-health is all about! It lifts us out of self-pity and self-absorption, and brings us into a working partnership with Jesus Himself. I close with a little story by Eddie Ogan:

I'll never forget Easter 1946. I was 14, my little sister Ocy was 12, and my older sister Darlene 16. We lived at home with our mother, and the four of us knew what it was to do without many things. My dad had died five years before, leaving Mom with seven school kids to raise and no money. By 1946 my older sisters were married and my brothers had left home.

A month before Easter the pastor of our church announced that a special Easter offering would be taken to help a poor family. He asked everyone to save and give sacrificially. When we got home, we talked about what we could do. We decided to buy 50 pounds of potatoes and live on them for a month. This would allow us to save \$20 of our grocery money for the offering. When we thought that if we kept our electric lights turned out as much as possible and didn't listen to the radio, we'd save money on that month's electric bill. Darlene got as many house and yard cleaning jobs as possible, and both of us babysat for everyone we could. For 15 cents we could buy enough cotton loops to make three pot holders to sell for \$1. We made \$20 on pot holders.

That month was one of the best of our lives. Every day we counted the money to see how much we had saved. At night we'd sit in the dark and talk about how the poor family was going to enjoy having the money the church would give them. We had about 80 people in church, so figured that whatever amount of money we had to give, the offering would surely be 20 times that much. After all, every Sunday the pastor had reminded everyone to save for the sacrificial offering. The day before Easter, Ocy

and I walked to the grocery store and got the manager to give us three crisp \$20 bills and one \$10 bill for all our change. We ran all the way home to show Mom and Darlene. We had never had so much money before. That night we were so excited we could hardly sleep. We didn't care that we wouldn't have new clothes for Easter; we had \$70 for the sacrificial offering. We could hardly wait to get to church!

On Sunday morning, rain was pouring. We didn't own an umbrella, and the church was over a mile from our home, but it didn't seem to matter how wet we got. Darlene had cardboard in her shoes to fill the holes. The cardboard came apart, and her feet got wet. But we sat in church proudly. I heard some teenagers talking about the Smith girls having on their old dresses. I looked at them in their new clothes, and I felt rich. When the sacrificial offering was taken, we were sitting on the second row from the front. Mom put in the \$10 bill, and each of us kids put in a \$20. As we walked home after church, we sang all the way. At lunch Mom had a surprise for us. She had bought a dozen eggs, and we had boiled Easter eggs with our fried potatoes!

Late that afternoon the minister drove up in his car. Mom went to the door, talked with him for a moment, and then came back with an envelope in her hand. We asked what it was, but she didn't say a word. She opened the envelope and out fell a bunch of money. There were three crisp \$20 bills, one \$10 and seventeen \$1 bills. Mom put the money back in the envelope. We didn't talk, just sat and stared at the floor. We had gone from feeling like millionaires to feeling like poor white trash.

We kids had such a happy life that we felt sorry for anyone who didn't have our Mom and Dad for parents and a house full of brothers and sisters and other kids visiting constantly. We thought it was fun to share silverware and see whether we got the spoon or the fork that night. We had two knives that we passed around to whoever needed them. I knew

we didn't have a lot of things that other people had, but I'd never thought we were poor. That Easter day I found out we were. The minister had brought us the money for the poor family, so we must be poor.

I didn't like being poor. I looked at my dress and worn out shoes and felt so ashamed I didn't even want to go back to church. Everyone there probably already knew we were poor! I thought about school. I was in the ninth grade and at the top of my class of over 100 students. I wondered if the kids at school knew that we were poor. I decided that I could quit school since I had finished the eighth grade. That was all the law required at that time.

We sat in silence for a long time. Then it got dark, and we went to bed. All that week, we girls went to school and came home, and no one talked much. Finally on Saturday, Mom asked us what we wanted to do with the money. What did poor people do with money? We didn't know. We'd never known we were poor.

We didn't want to go to church on Sunday, but Mom said we had to. Although it was a sunny day, we didn't talk on the way. Mom started to sing, but no one joined in and she only sang one verse.

At church we had a missionary speaker. He talked about how churches in Africa made buildings out of sun dried bricks, but they needed money to buy roofs. He said \$100 would put a roof on a church. The minister said, "Can't we all sacrifice to help these poor people?" We looked at each other and smiled for the first time in a week.

Mom reached into her purse and pulled out the envelope. She passed it to Darlene. Darlene gave it to me, and I handed it to Ocy. Ocy put it in the offering. When the offering was counted, the minister announced that it was a little over \$100. The missionary was excited. He hadn't expected such a large offering from our small church. He said, "You must have some rich people in this church."

Suddenly it struck us! We had given \$87 of that "little over \$100." We were the richest family in our church! Hadn't the missionary said so? From that day on I've never been poor again. I've always remembered how rich I am because I have Jesus!

**Prayer:** Heavenly Father, You have shown your great love to us by giving us your Son, Jesus Christ, who has himself loved us and given himself for us. By your grace, help us to obey this Great Commandment, and love as Jesus has shown us so to do. This we ask in His Name who with the Holy Spirit lives and reigns with You, One God, world without end. Amen

Closing Chorus



## Anticipation: Meeting Jesus in the In-Between Times

*Ashes to Fire #12 of 14*

1. Meeting Jesus at the Place of Confession
2. Believing Have Life
3. Repentance
4. The Unfinished Story
5. Humility The Root Virtue
6. Veiled Majesty
7. A Story of Faith
8. Obedience and the Other Witness
9. Reaching Out: The First Breakfast
10. A Shepherd and a Promise
11. Love: A New Covenant
12. **Anticipation: Meeting Jesus in the In-Between Times**
13. Unity: The Countdown to Pentecost
14. Fire: Pentecost is the Norm

May 17, 1998

John 14:23-29; Acts 16:9-15

The period between Easter and Pentecost is divided into two distinct periods, punctuated by the Ascension of Jesus at the end of forty days. The final ten days were given a sharp focus by the final command of Jesus to wait in Jerusalem for the "promise" (Promise) of the Father. Those ten days were certainly an "in-between time."

The first forty days after the resurrection were not quite so clearly focused. Those days were even more of an 'in-between time,' for things were certainly not the same as they had been before. They would never be the same again. Jesus was alive, but

he did not now speak publicly, or show himself to unbelievers. The disciples knew things had to change, but they didn't know what to expect. In their wildest dreams they could not have imagined what lay ahead. They could not know what the Promise would mean to them, personally. They could not know where the indwelling Spirit would take them.

During this in-between time it seems Jesus was concerned mainly with shaping and guiding the faith of his beloved disciples. He made himself known to his own. They had known him before, yes. But now there was a new dimension. Their Lord had been crucified, dead and buried. He had returned with a new and glorious body that seemed to appear and disappear, and yet was very, very real. That body itself was a promise of what the disciples one day would be.

In making himself known, the emphasis was on faith to faith. Where his disciples talked about him, Jesus showed up: Emmaus and the breaking of the bread; Galilee, and the restoration of Peter; More than 500 believers at one time and place saw and touched and fellowshiped with the risen Lord. But always in this in-between time the emphasis was on faith: "I am he that lives, and was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore!"

Jesus during this time reinforced the role and purpose of the scriptures. he had already stated clearly to the religious scholars (John 5:39) that the purpose of the scriptures was not in and of themselves to give eternal life, but rather to testify to the Living Word who himself IS life. Now the risen Lord became the Teacher, and beginning with Moses and all the Old Testament prophets— which was all the Bible then extant— Jesus expounded to the disciples the things concerned Himself. And as he did their hearts were warmed, and their faith lifted. In the in-between times they found strength in seeing Christ in the Word.

Jesus also during this in-between time reminded them that the Promise was God indwelling them. Jesus had told them that when the Spirit came he would do two things: (1) guide the believers, and (2) convince the WORLD that He, Jesus, is the Christ!



How does this apply to our own "in-between times"? Those times when our next step is not quite clear, or, if it is more sharply focused, at least we do not know exactly how to take that next step? What can we learn from the word today?

Maybe we all are always in "in-between times." but there are especially difficult times that could only be described as transition periods. New choices to make. Decisions to be made. (How I HATED the East after I got here!!)

- Which college shall I attend?
- Which grad school would be God's choice for me?
- Should I marry him? her?
- What career is really best for me?
- Does God really "have a plan for my life?"

The lesson from Acts is an object lesson of "in-between time" decision making in the life of the greatest missionary who ever lived, the Apostle Paul.

1. He decided to go east. Nothing wrong with the decision— except— the Lord blocked him twice- so—
2. A closed door is an answer; not a final answer, but an answer all the same
3. Paul had a vision. That could be in itself dangerous. But then came an open door—
4. They moved through, believing God was leading Their spirit is everything here. It is not arrogance or self-seeking. If they get in trouble honestly and openly, it still comes under Romans 8:28 which had not yet been written but which is true eternally!
5. They met Lydia— everything starts out great— they even have a victory over evil— and
6. They end up in prison, at midnight, in stocks in the inner prison— but that is another great story!

Two things in final challenge:

In the in-between times God is still with us; we can deliberately seek to be his witnesses. Chinese people showing us the way! I challenge us to tell people: "God is good! God loves YOU!"

In the in-between times God will never abandon us!

## Anticipation: Meeting Jesus in the In-

One of the great In-Between Times in this century was during World War II, when the Nazis were bombing London every night, and the outcome of the war was very much unknown. At the end of each year the British sovereign would address his people over radio, and during those dark days King George VI, the father of the present queen strengthened his people with this saying that has since become well known:

"I said to the man who stands at the Gate of the Year, 'Give me light that I may tread safely into the unknown.' And he replied, 'Step into the darkness, put your hand into the hand of God, and that will be to you better than a light, and safer than a known way.'"

In the in-between times we have the Promise that the Holy Spirit will come, he will teach us, and reminds us of everything Jesus said, and lead us in His peace. Amen

### **Prayer**

Eternal Father, just as you made clear your will to Paul and Silas in calling them to Macedonia, we ask that you will make your will clear to those who seek you in the in-between times of life. Give us the assurance that your Presence is with us, and by your Holy Spirit teach us and empower us to know and do your will, in Jesus' holy name, who with you and the Holy Spirit reigns forever, One God, world without end. Amen

Hymn    *Have Thine Own Way, Lord* #480 or    *I Give All to You* #482

## Unity: The Countdown to Pentecost

*ASHES TO FIRE Series 13 of 14*

1. Meeting Jesus at the Place of Confession
2. Believing Have Life
3. Repentance
4. The Unfinished Story
5. Humility The Root Virtue
6. Veiled Majesty
7. A Story of Faith
8. Obedience and the Other Witness
9. Reaching Out: The First Breakfast
10. A Shepherd and a Promise
11. Love: A New Covenant
12. Anticipation: Meeting Jesus in the In-Between Times
13. **Unity: The Countdown to Pentecost**
14. Fire: Pentecost is the Norm

May 24, 1998

John 17:20-26

THERE WAS A BIG HOLE IN THE SKY. A loud silence! Jesus was gone! They stood there with their faces turned up and their mouths open. Two shining beings brought them confirmation of what somehow they already knew: they knew this was a forever kind of change. Things were never going to be the same ever again.

Jesus was gone, but he did leave definite instructions: Don't leave town! Jesus had told them, "Go into all the world! Begin in Jerusalem and go to Judea and Samaria and to the uttermost part of the earth— but for NOW— don't leave town!" I have Something— Someone— that I want to give you! I promise!

So in obedience the disciples went back to Jerusalem. They waited. And they prayed. During the next ten days there was a focus in their faith that brought them to where the scriptures say they were "in one place in one accord."

### **WHAT OR WHERE IS THIS PLACE WHERE PENTECOST COMES?**

For the disciples it was the Upper Room, the place where they had had Communion with Jesus. That place became a place of unity of PURPOSE and OBEDIENCE.

Everything else went "on hold" until God came as He had promised. It was also a place of unity in FAITH and TRUST. The Resurrection had given them faith to know that Jesus is as good as His Word! That living faith was enough for them to hold them steady if they had to wait one day or ten days or more.

A place where Jesus' own prayer is answered: During the ten days they did wait the disciples certainly remembered the last prayer Jesus had prayed when they were together in this same Upper Room. It was a prayer for Himself: "Father, glorify me with the glory I had before the world!" It became a prayer for them: "Father, let these my friends share that glory, too!" But wonder of wonders, that High Priestly Prayer is a prayer for you and me! We, too, can come to the place where Pentecost happens!

It was a prayer for unity: "Make them one, Father! One with us— one with one another!" That prayer for unity was a feature of the High Priestly prayer that hits us right in the face. It is inescapable.

### **CAN PENTECOST BE REPEATED?**

It has been many times, in many places. In one real sense Pentecost happens every time a soul is born into the Kingdom, or every time a believer is filled with the Holy Spirit. But as a mighty moving of God on His church? Can that happen again? I believe the answer is "Yes!" I also believe it is the only hope for the church to survive as the church and make any impact at all on this generation. "Yes!"

### **CAN WE MAKE PENTECOST HAPPEN AGAIN?**

The answer absolutely is "No!" We are so self-confident in our age we think all we have to do is get in the right speaker— organize the right kind of rally— discipline ourselves, pray more— and we can have Pentecost again any time we want!

But that is all backwards! No one commands the Holy Spirit! He is not a captive of any sect or denomination. The Spirit's coming is always of grace! He responds when believers believe Jesus' Promise, and obey His command to wait.

### **CAN YOU AND I, CAN WE COME TO THE PLACE WHERE PENTECOST COMES?**

We have been pointing toward Pentecost for 13 weeks now: Confessing... believing... repenting... in humility... obedience... in reaching out... in Christ-like love and anticipation... we have been pointing toward Pentecost! We want to know what it means to be awakened by God's Spirit!

Whatever took place those ten days— we don't know— but human effort— even human prayer was not what brought the Spirit. The Spirit's coming was all of grace. It was attractive. It was powerful. It was also frightening, awesome, and wonderful beyond description. It was the first mighty Awakening of the Holy Spirit. It has been repeated over and over again where God's people have come simply agreeing that they want God more than they want anything else!

When the church across the centuries has sought for God as more than a fire-escape, or more than a therapeutic convenience to enhance our life-style— when the church has given up its own selfish ways, God has been found!

### **THE SPIRIT IS A GIFT OF GOD'S GRACE!**

It is hard to grasp, but Jesus said that if we simply ask the Father, He will give us the Holy Spirit as the free gift of His grace. Jesus said that as imperfect and self-centered as we can be, if we enjoy giving good and necessary things to our children— then HOW MUCH MORE WILL THE HEAVENLY FATHER GIVE THE HOLY SPIRIT TO THOSE WHO ASK? What would happen if we really believed that?

### **HOW ONE MAN CAME TO ASSURANCE:**

In England one man had been seeking God's Spirit to witness with his own spirit that he was a child of God. Exactly 260 years ago this very day a 35-year old Anglican priest opened his Testament at five in the morning to the words: "There are given unto us exceeding great and precious promises, even that ye should be partakers of the divine nature." (2 Peter 1:4,) and then saw the words "Thou art not far from the kingdom of God." In the afternoon he went to Vespers at St. Paul's, and the anthem sung there was:

"Out of the deep have I called unto Thee, O Lord: Lord, hear my voice. O Let thine ears consider well the voice of my complaint. If thou, Lord, wilt mark evil, O Lord, who can abide it? For there is mercy with thee; therefore shalt thou be feared... And he shall redeem Israel from all his sins."

And then in his journal that Anglican priest wrote these famous words: "In the evening I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate-Street, where one was reading Luther's preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation: And an assurance was given me, that he had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death." This was the Holy Spirit's enlightenment to John Wesley. In his own words: "before I had served with the faith of a servant— now I could serve as a son."

God used Wesley's dynamic energy, and his methodistic approach to life, and certainly Wesley's genius for organizing believers into small groups for accountability. But it was not until Wesley saw that salvation was all of grace, and surrendered even his ambition and considerable strength of will that God brought powerful assurance, and the Wesleyan Revival that saved Britain from untold loss was begun. And at the heart of Wesley's newfound Holy Spirit assurance was a spirit that called for unity and love as well as renewal and revival throughout the Church of Jesus Christ:

On Wesley's Day— Aldersgate Day we might well ponder his words: John Wesley himself said: "By... a living faith... we labour to distinguish ourselves from the unbelieving world. ... But from real Christians, of whatsoever denomination they be, we earnestly desire not to be distinguished at all; not from any who sincerely follow after what they know they have not yet attained. ... Is thy heart right, as my heart is with thine? I ask no farther question. If it be, give me thy hand. For opinions, or terms, let us not destroy the work of God. Dost thou love and serve God? It is enough. I give thee the right hand of fellowship." ... (3)

Wesley came to the place where God could come on His terms, and the rest is history:

CAN YOU AND I, CAN WE COME TO THE PLACE WHERE PENTECOST COMES?

### **Prayer**

Lord, Bring us to the place where Pentecost can come! We do not pray for uniformity, O God. We do not expect to agree on so many things of life. But, O great Father, we hunger and thirst for YOU! We want to be Your dwelling place! We unite our hearts in asking for the Holy Spirit in His fullness— the Promise Jesus made, and the prayer for us He prayed.

This we ask in His name, who with You and the Holy Spirit reign forever and ever, One God, world without end. Amen

Hymn "*Come, Holy Spirit, I Need You*"





## Fire: Pentecost is the Norm

### *ASHES TO FIRE Series 14 of 14*

1. Meeting Jesus at the Place of Confession
2. Believing Have Life
3. Repentance
4. The Unfinished Story
5. Humility The Root Virtue
6. Veiled Majesty
7. A Story of Faith
8. Obedience and the Other Witness
9. Reaching Out: The First Breakfast
10. A Shepherd and a Promise
11. Love: A New Covenant
12. Anticipation: Meeting Jesus in the In-Between Times
13. Unity: The Countdown to Pentecost
14. **Fire: Pentecost is the Norm**

May 31, 1998

*In the last days, God declares, I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh ... Acts 2:17*

Today we celebrate one of the three great days of the entire church year. Everyone celebrates Christmas, and most people even know that it has to do with the birth of Jesus, whether or not they call Him God and Lord. Most people celebrate Easter, and some of them know that Easter, too, has to do with Jesus, and His victory over death and sin.

But then, at least in our country, comes Thanksgiving, (when we do have ecumenical services; and that is good, although most Americans are more tuned into football

and a big family reunion and meal), and then Super Bowl, and of course the Fourth of July.

But what is Pentecost? Why should anyone call it one of the "big three" Christian holy days? Do you know? To begin with:

### **PENTECOST IS (ANOTHER) TRANSFORMED JEWISH HOLY DAY**

We say Pentecost is ANOTHER transformed Jewish holy day because Christians have seen Christ as the fulfillment behind just about all the Old Testament. Jesus is our Passover Lamb, and Jesus is our Seder Host, transforming the Passover Meal into the Communion we will share this morning. And so Passover, too, takes on fulfilling significance to Christians.

Pentecost was and is a Jewish feast day celebrating two things. Called "Pesach" or "Pentecost" because it follows fifty days after Passover and the High Holy Days, Pentecost was first a celebration of the first harvesting of summer fruits. It anticipates the later, greater harvest of the autumn season. Pentecost also in later times came to be a commemoration of the giving of the law to Moses on Sinai. Devout Jews praised God for giving guidance to all mankind on how to live lives of order and righteousness. The giving of the Law can be contrasted with the giving of confusion at Babel, when God confused those who were trying to reach heaven on their own wisdom; the giving of the Law is God's way of bringing order out of chaos.

### **WHAT HAPPENED THAT FIRST PENTECOST?**

First of all, what happened on Pentecost was that the gathered disciples received the indwelling Holy Spirit, and the Church as Christ's body came into existence. It was the birthday of the church.

Christians believe that on the Jewish feast of Pentecost that came 50 days after Jesus rose from the dead, and ten days after He ascended to the Father, Jesus, HAVING RECEIVED THE FULLNESS OF GLORY, for which he prayed in John 17: 1, Jesus then poured that Spirit He had received out upon his beloved disciples.

This was THE FIRST FRUITS of a great harvest which was to come. As a matter of fact that FIRST FRUIT CELEBRATION that day netted 3,000 new believers in Jesus Christ! It is a celebration of FIRST FRUITS.

The Christian Pentecost might seem to have little to do with the second aspect of the Jewish celebration: the giving of the law to Moses on the mount. But actually, here was a fulfillment of the promise that God would pour out His Spirit on all flesh, and as Paul declares in 2 Corinthians 3:3 God wrote his law now not on tables of stone, but on fleshy tables of the human heart. And instead of confusion of languages, now everyone could hear God's plan of salvation in a language they could understand. In the words of a Sandi Patti song: "Fluent LOVE is spoken here!"

There were other, dramatic things that happened that day of Pentecost. There was mighty, shaking, fearsome sound of hurricane force wind. There were licking, flaming, forked tongues of fire. And there were languages spoken in order that every person who came to see what was happening could understand who Jesus is, and how he can deliver from sin.

Once again here was a direct contrast with Babel: where Babel had been confusion and misunderstanding, Pentecost was God's law in the hearts, God's law of LOVE, and the opposite of confusion: interpretation: everyone heard in his own language the message of salvation.

We have been trained to think of Pentecost and the Holy Spirit only in the rushing wind, and the tongues of fire, and the exotic gifts of language or experience. But first of all the coming of the Spirit is God loving us, and coming to make his home in us so that we can be at home in him on our way home.

### **THE NEED FOR PENTECOST TODAY**

This is the NORM for our Christian existence. The Holy Spirit IS the life of the Church. No Spirit- no life! The Spirit fills every believer to the extent of his/her capacity. There is a deeper life for those who will seek the fullness of the Spirit's blessing. There are wonderful benefits to be received from living the life of full surrender to God's will. But it begins with the Holy Spirit coming to live in you and me and

together making us the Church. Welcome the Holy Spirit into your inner being this very day!

Pentecost, or the descent of the Holy Spirit into the human heart, is NOT a doctrine or belief system to defend, but a reality to know and live out. As humanly understood belief systems, even the precious doctrines of our church, even holiness doctrines, are fallible— they are subject to the shortcomings of human understanding that mark all human belief systems. But as a living encounter with God holiness, being filled with God Himself, transforms lives and changes the course of human history. Almighty God actually DOES come to live in His people, and together God's people ARE the Church.

Faith in God must permeate the whole of my being and yours, not simply logically exist in my thinking, or excitedly flood my emotions, or even determinedly rest in my human will. God must be made welcome at the center of all I am and all I do! As a Person God can make Himself known to me, and can dominate my living and your living. And together you and I are the living Church of Pentecost. That is what Pentecost is all about: that is why is a BIG DAY!

### **PETER'S SERMON**

That day Peter stood up and declared the glory and love and power of Jesus Christ. He told the devout Jews assembled that they needed to change their direction: "Repent, and be baptized, every one of you, for the forgiveness of your sins!"

Then he told them: "This God-shared LOVE, this Holy Spirit is to every one of you who will believe!

[HERE DEPARTURE FROM '95 TEXT]

[[Gordon Ramsey's '98 ideas here:]]

I don't know how many different meanings and lessons we are able to pick up from the coming of the Holy Spirit, as we celebrate it at Pentecost. Every time we discover one meaning, there seems to be 3 or 4 more, jumping out at us as well!

But that in itself is something about Pentecost: it is about ABUNDANCE. When the spirit of God is involved, there is always MORE THAN ENOUGH!

Enough for males and for females enough for young and for old enough for slaves and for free people enough for Jews and all the nations under the earth.

And as the life of the early church demonstrated, this over-abundance flowed on into all other aspects of their life - land, property, food, shelter, community.

Whenever people in the NT times talk about experiencing God's spirit, their language demonstrates the abundance that God provides. In all ways people have "more than enough".

The Spirit is the spirit of life and the fullness of life.

From the very first day, however, the spirit of abundance had its knockers. Cynicism reared its ugly head, standing, as it always does, against the movement of God's Spirit.

"They're just drunk" some said.

"The writers got carried away" others still say. "It isn't the same now. Can't be"

But the cynics miss the point of Pentecost. It is a reality of abundance, just as God is the God of reality and the God who is given to excess!. But the more we dismiss it as "idealistic" or "unrealistic" the more we move away from the pouring of the Spirit and the experience of God's excessive grace. So how is there really more than enough?

Firstly, Pentecost is grounded in Easter. It makes sense once people have been freed from the grip of death and destruction. You see, once people are no longer menaced by the threat of death, we are freed to live. Death is ultimately a denial of all things needed for our life: but the resurrection proclaims that Jesus has overcome that which robs us of life our entire lives are transformed into an experience of divine life

Secondly, and going on a step, we are remember that the early followers of Jesus were said to be "Of one heart and mind" That is part of what Pentecost means: The spirit who comes to us is the Spirit of Unity God's Spirit overcomes the division, the

power struggles, the hatred and suspicions. The Spirit does not remove the differences but an openness to the Spirit means that the differences do not lead to a struggle for superiority over those who are different. When we are no longer afraid of one another, looking for people's "hidden agenda" we are freed to enjoy a depth of life and discover God. And there is always more than enough.

And thirdly, again from the life of the early church, we are reminded that "no one claimed things as their own, but shared everything in common" The most down to earth outcome is the most striking! As we discover the freedom for life and for unity we are freed from the spirit of accumulation that dogs us in this world. Freed from the fear of death and anxiety about life, life is transformed for each of us. And it doesn't just stop with "our own people". (If it did, it wouldn't be Christian) Even 300 years later, emperor Julian comments: "These Christians do not merely feed their own poor; they feed the poor of the whole city"

The cynic, the staunch 'capitalist', within us says that there is NOT enough for everyone. And so we must constantly compete for that which is there. In fact there is part within us and around us that declares that the world works best with competition But it is that drive for competition which works so effectively against the spirit of God.

We compete for goods, for schools, for marks, for jobs, for income, for friends and it is this incessant competition which divides us and fragments community. As we compete, we divide into nations, class, race, gender, age, background And as we believe that there is not enough, and it is "everyone for themselves" We forget the fact that at Pentecost the prophecy of inclusive acceptance was fulfilled: "My Spirit will come on ALL people - young, old, male, female, slaves, free ..."

The Spirit of Pentecost, the Spirit of God, the Holy Spirit bring us back to discovering the joy of abundance in life and the rediscovery of what life is. For Pentecost re-opens to us the joy, the delight, the extravagance and the responsibility that we have to re-build community to share our life with one another. For as we build and live in community, we discover true richness. Christian community can become the source of reforming the rest of society.

It is our joy to discover new life by the Spirit, and to live by that discovery.

The Spirit has given us all gifts. Let us use them. Pentecost is about pooling our gifts humbly and selflessly so that we can build a way to reach God. It is about building a house that leaves no one homeless—a Church.

Into Communion:

- First Preparing
- Next Choir (we ALL sing verse 4)
- Then Creed #8
- Then Prayers
- Then #304 (*Sweet, Sweet Spirit*) leads into Offering

**NOTE:** Much of this sermon was preached on June 4, 1995 in a text by the same title. Look for it under "The Norm: Pentecost."

