



September 25, 2024
A Note from Pastor April

Dear Friends,

“You’re playing with fire.”
~Parental words of wisdom to our teenagers



The symbol of the United Methodist Church for the last 56 years has been the cross and flame. Behind the familiar Christian symbol of the cross, we see a red flame, a symbol of the powerful presence of the Holy Spirit, seemingly floating in the air and providing a vivid red backdrop.

The church could have chosen another image of the Holy Spirit. If you Google the words “Holy Spirit images,” the first things to pop up are not images of flames. They are peaceful images of doves.

So, why fire?

Fire is such a fascinating and paradoxical phenomenon. Fire is something we rely on for survival. It warms our homes, helps produce the energy the world needs, and is essential for the manufacturing of all kinds of materials, from metals to glass to plastics.

At the same time, improperly managed, fire is the source of great devastation. Even in Ohio, we have experienced the smoke pollution from wildfires out of control thousands of miles away in Canada.

In the winter of 1997, while I was away at college, my childhood home in Arkansas, burned to the ground. It was a devastating loss for my family, especially my siblings and parents, who were left with only the clothes on their back. While we suspect the fire started from the wood burning stove, its ultimate source was a mystery. Thankfully everyone survived, including pets.



What a strange symbol to be using for the Holy Spirit.

Yet scripture says to us in Acts chapter 2 that after Jesus's resurrection and ascension into heaven, on the day of Pentecost (the harvest festival), the disciples experienced a powerful filling of the Holy Spirit that allowed them to speak in ways that they hadn't been able to before. They described the experience in v. 3:

“They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them.”

And then in Luke chapter 3, just before Jesus begins his ministry, we see his cousin John the Baptist preparing people for the coming of Jesus. John says to them,

“I baptize you with water, but one who is more powerful than I is coming; ... he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.”

Tongues of fire?

Baptism by fire?



I was reading these verses in Luke 3 a month or so ago with a young man I had been meeting with to prepare him for baptism. Connor is a friend of one of the families here at HUMC. In his preparation for marriage, he realized that he had never been baptized. He felt like this was the time to prepare for and to take this step in his own faith. He wanted God to be a part of this new commitment he was making, so his friend suggested he give me a call. We started meeting over the summer.

Connor is a firefighter. For him, it's not just a job, it's his chosen vocation, a place where he finds great meaning and purpose. When we arrived at this passage about baptism by fire, he started to make some connections.

He began to describe to me a phenomenon of fire known as a **flashover**. Most of us have seen the devastating effects (at least on television) that can happen when a fire burns so hot and the smoke has spread so far, that entire vehicles, buildings, and city blocks can "spontaneously" burst into flames.



Connor described to me the training that firefighters must go through so that they can spot this phenomenon *before* it happens. They go into a flashover simulator trailer, so they can experience firsthand what transpires as the fire gets hotter and hotter. One of the early signs that a flashover is coming is when the wisps of smoke moving through the air get so hot that they begin to sporadically burst into flashes of flame.

"It's actually beautiful," Connor said. "It's also a sign that something very powerful is about to happen and you need to be ready."

He looked across my office and noticed the symbol of the cross and flame.

"What's that?"

We started making all kinds of connections between this symbol of our church and the meaning behind it.

The metaphor of the Holy Spirit as fire made perfect sense to Connor and added a richness and nuance to my own understanding. **We talked at length about this powerful force that "ignites" in us a passion and vitality, burns away the excesses, and then spreads easily to those we encounter.**

We made connections to what the early church must have experienced on that first Pentecost. The tongues of fire were the first signs that something very powerful was about to happen. Their job was to be faithful and ready as God's spirit began to move them into uncharted territory.

This Sunday, it will be my honor to baptize Connor at our 9am service. We won't be lighting any physical fires, but the power of what the Holy Spirit is doing in this young man's life and the ways it connects to all of us will be clearly on display.

We'll also finish our time in Paul's first Letter to the Corinthians, reading through one of the more troubling parts of scripture and the role of women. **Some might say I'll be playing a bit with fire! I also trust that the work of the Holy Spirit will help us get to the heart**

of what this passage is about and nudge us to keep bearing witness to the powerful movement of God among us.

Lastly, we'll be delighted to welcome our new Vocalist, Sydney McSweeney, to our utterly exceptional HUMC Music Staff.

Sydney will be primarily providing vocal leadership at our 10:30 service, but this week, you'll get to see her at all 3 services. I won't be surprised if a few of you go home and say to yourself, "Her voice is fire!"

See you Sunday...

April



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