

## “A Fiery Spirit”

a message by Dr. Bruce Havens  
based on the theme, “THE JESUS YOU MEET TODAY”  
Arlington Congregational Church, U.C.C.  
May 31, 2009

### John 15:26 – 16:15 [ NRSV ]

<sup>26</sup> “When the Advocate comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who comes from the Father, he will testify on my behalf. <sup>27</sup> You also are to testify because you have been with me from the beginning.

<sup>4</sup> But I have said these things to you so that when their hour comes you may remember that I told you about them. “I did not say these things to you from the beginning, because I was with you. <sup>5</sup> But now I am going to him who sent me; yet none of you asks me, ‘Where are you going?’ <sup>6</sup> But because I have said these things to you, sorrow has filled your hearts.

<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you. <sup>8</sup> And when he comes, he will prove the world wrong about sin and righteousness and judgment: <sup>9</sup> about sin, because they do not believe in me; <sup>11</sup> about righteousness, because I am going to the Father and you will see me no longer; <sup>11</sup> about judgment, because the ruler of this world has been condemned. <sup>12</sup> “I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. <sup>13</sup> When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. <sup>14</sup> He will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you. <sup>15</sup> All that the Father has is mine. For this reason I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you.

---

**T**oday is Pentecost. So what? What does that mean in today’s world? What does a religious celebration that goes back to Moses mean today? Yes, originally Pentecost was the Jewish celebration of the giving of the Ten Commandments, 50 days after their exodus from Egypt. But that’s just history. What about today?

The first Christians, who were Jewish of course, came together on that day, and God sent not new laws but a new spirit. God sent a fiery spirit on those first believers and that spirit brought them together and they became

Christ’s church. People of all different languages came together and understood each other. They became probably one of the first multi-cultural, multi-racial communities in history. But that is still history, so what?

Let me talk about one more piece of history before I get to the so what about today. In this passage we hear Jesus promise to send the Spirit. This Spirit is one that would bring the truth about sin and righteousness and judgment. I know how a lot of us have probably heard this interpreted over the years, but that is still history. What does

that mean for you and me today, in 2009? Is there any reason we should get “fired up” about that? I want to give you a different insight that I feel will help us better understand what Jesus meant when he said this and what it means for us in relation to the Jesus you meet today.

In today’s world people have moved on from organized religion. At least that is what the popular polls are reporting in newsmagazines and such. The preference is more “private” spirituality and less community. The opinion is that organized religious institutions really don’t have much truth to share. Other polls report that the interest in “spirituality” in some form or another is increasing. So what do these old, historical texts mean for us in terms of spirituality, religion, and faith today?

We have all heard or seen the stories of whales and even whole pods of whales getting stranded on beaches. In some cases workers have tried to drag them back out into the ocean only to have them immediately beach themselves again. Some researchers believe the cause is a virus that destroys or damages their internal navigation system. They cannot distinguish between a path that leads to destruction and path that leads to life.

John Jewell says, “There is an equally devastating consequence that takes place when we lose our spiritual bearings. In the deepest spiritual sense, we don’t know where we’re going, can’t remember our destination, and wind up totally lost. Life becomes a maze and we

are ripe for someone or something to come along and fill the void.” Then you have a wide variety of options. You can turn to spiritual guides like Shirley MacLaine, or Deepak Chopra, or even Oprah Winfrey. Jewell reminds us “we were designed to have a spiritual guidance system. That’s part of being created in the image of God.”<sup>1</sup> I believe that same Spirit that Jesus talked about back then is the one the Jesus you meet today can give us – a spiritual guidance source that can give us a reason to be fired up as Christians about our faith.

I think Christ is still calling us to be “the church” today and as the church we are called to be “fired up” today. I believe the Spirit is still at work firing up churches. I’m fired up about being part of a church that has a fiery spirit. When I listen to what Jesus says about the Holy Spirit here I see that there are ways that same Spirit can be at work in us today. I think that Spirit helps us understand just what the Jesus you meet today expects of his body, the church.

Jesus says the Spirit, the Advocate, will speak truth. He says when the Spirit comes it will prove the world wrong. He says it will prove the world wrong about judgment because the ruler of this world has been condemned. I think this means the power of the values of the culture that contradict Christ’s values are dead already. They are already proven to be value-less. That means the church’s values need to be different from the

---

<sup>1</sup> John Jewell, “Your Spirit Guide,” [lectionarysermons.com](http://lectionarysermons.com), June 7, 1998.

world, not just to be different, but in the way Christ calls us to be different.

Today's world doesn't seem to have any agreed upon concept of justice. Debates about our government using torture in the battle against terrorism fall along religious lines, but not the way I would have expected. In a poll of Americans more people who call themselves Christian approve the use of torture than disapproved. Deeper investigation of the numbers tells us that this Christian majority also identified themselves as evangelical, Republican, and conservative. One observer commented by asking if the people polled were letting their Christianity inform their politics or their politics shape their Christianity? In the day and age where we believe you can believe whatever you want to believe and if it is right for you then it is okay, so what?

I believe the Holy Spirit is still moving through churches calling us to be vibrant, dynamic alternatives to the value systems and lifestyles of the culture we live in today. Studies of today's churches show that churches that are not multi-cultural and multi-racial are generally stagnant, and aren't growing. Those that are multi-racial are much more likely to be growing.<sup>2</sup> If we want to be willing to welcome all people to come and worship we better be ready for them to be different. We better be ready for them to change our church. We better be ready for the Holy Spirit to

get things fired up in ways we may not have been fired up about before.

In John, Jesus says the Spirit will prove the world wrong when it comes to righteousness. I hear this differently from those who think this is only about believing right things, or being against homosexuality. I think it is about doing justice and acting compassionately. That's how I think Christ defines righteousness. I believe the Spirit is still at work firing up churches to be about the work of justice and compassion in every realm of life.

Another study that I read recently said that churches that are growing, churches that are "on-fire" are churches that have expressed a commitment to serve their community with justice and compassion. The first church was known for this. People came to the Christian community because they fed the poor, they harbored the refugee, they cared for the prisoner. In short, they did what Jesus said – they believed in him.

In this passage Jesus says the Spirit will prove the world wrong because it doesn't believe in him. I don't hear this the way the fundamentalist does. The fundamentalist hears this as a claim to an exclusive truth about Jesus. I hear it as a call to believe in Jesus enough to do what he said do: feed the hungry, welcome the stranger, cloth the naked and do it in his name. To me that is what the Spirit of Truth and fire calls us to do. That is why we go to City Rescue Mission to serve a meal. That is why we provide a place for Family Promise, that

---

<sup>2</sup> According to Kirk Hadaway, as quoted by William Willimon's, [willimon.blogspot.com](http://willimon.blogspot.com) Dec, 1, 2008.

is why we welcome those who are different from us racially, politically, sexually, and economically.

Finally, I will answer “so what?” by saying that in John we hear Jesus say the Spirit will prove the world wrong because it does not believe in him. I believe Christ continues to be a unique and particular expression of spirituality. I don’t get fired up about a bland, impersonal, generalized spirituality. I find I am fired up by the ways in which the Living Christ challenges my spirituality, rechannels my tendency to want things my way and calls me away from self-satisfied complacency to an active engagement in a hurting, frightened, and often times frightening world.

I want a faith with a fiery spirit. Fire can burn, it can warm, it can give light, it can destroy, it can give comfort, and it can be dangerous. My mother, like your mother probably taught you not to play with fire. She was right both in the physical realm and the spiritual realm. Don’t play with fire. Take it seriously and realize it has power. It has power to guide and direct us toward truth that makes us uncomfortable and uncertain, as much as it can give comfort and certainty. But the Fiery Spirit of God is not something to play with.

The problem comes when we think any navigational system is okay. That’s what the world wants us to believe. That’s how you get burned. God wants to guide us in truth, not just in opinion. God doesn’t offer us psychic

hotlines, spiritual gurus, or Egyptian wizards. I don’t want Shirley McLaine, Deepak Chopra, or Oprah to give me spiritual guidance. God offers us the spirit of Jesus Christ, a spirit of truth, a fiery spirit that burns away what is false and will not go out in the dark of night or the blowing storm.

I am fired up about Pentecost because I believe the Holy Spirit is at work. I believe it is at work in our church shaping our vision and mission and inspiring the participation of you as volunteers in ministry and mission both here in the church and out in the world.

The question of “so what” is one God always turns around on us. God still sends the Holy Spirit to fire up his people and to energize his church. We are the ones who have to decide what we will do about it. How will we respond to the Holy Spirit? Will we dampen it, turn away from its bright light, put out its risky flame for something tame, something safe, something for our own comfort rather than for God’s purposes? You and I hold the answer to that and the Jesus we meet today is waiting for our answer. AMEN.