

“Strange Fire”  
Rev. Dr. Leah Fowler  
Presbyterian Church in Leonia  
Pentecost Sunday  
May 28, 2023

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Acts 2:1-21  
1 Corinthians 12:3b-13

I just want to take an informal poll: when we talk about God as known in three ways- God the Creator, Jesus the Son, and the Holy Spirit, who do you relate to the most? Who do you pray to? I know that we are a trinitarian church, meaning that in our faith and devotion, we are supposed to consider all 3 parts of the trinity equal. However, I’m pretty certain it’s safe to guess that most of you play favorites. I’m actually going to ask for a show of hands: of the three, God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit,

How many relate most to God?

How many relate most to Jesus?

How many relate most to the Holy Spirit?

Some people say that it’s easiest to talk about God. Maybe that’s because God is supposed to be all-encompassing. If you call on God, you’ve got it covered. If God is the Creator of all things, that seems like a pretty worthwhile one to go to.

But historically, Jesus is the easiest to pinpoint– we know from the bible but also from secular sources that he lived and taught in a particular time and place; he angered the authorities and was killed for sedition, under the death penalty for the Roman Empire: hanging on a cross. We even hear news from the Holy Land now and then about archeological finds that actually unearth the real footsteps of Jesus. For example, about 10 years ago, a Catholic organization which had bought land to build a retreat center along the Sea of Galilee discovered something amazing in the excavation required before any building can happen in the Holy Land: lying beneath the ruins where they were going to build was the town of Magdala, the home of Jesus’ female disciple, Mary Magdalene. Within that town, archaeologists found a treasure: a first-century synagogue, one of only seven in Israel or Palestine. Jesus, who had spent the heart of his ministry along the Sea of Galilee, would have taken time as a rabbi to teach and lead gatherings at the synagogue; Matthew’s gospel even mentions Jesus teaching in the town of Magdala.<sup>1</sup>

**They can excavate the footsteps of Jesus. But what do we have to show for the Holy Spirit?**

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<sup>1</sup> Ofira Koopmans, “Synagogue where Jesus likely preached uncovered in Israel” in Ha’aretz, Dec. 22, 2014.

What Acts gives us is wind, fire, and tongues. You can't really see wind as much as its impact. You can feel it awaken your flesh as its breeze skids across skin, coaxing goose bumps to emerge. You can witness the upheaval it causes when wind announces itself with more power and strength than that which anchors buildings and homes.

Tongues make a delightful appearance on the Pentecost. It's like a reversal of the Tower of Babel story, when the very early people of God try to build a tower to the heavens. Out of concern that the people will try to be like God and maybe then not rely on God, God confuses their tongues, so that they speak many different languages instead of one, and can no longer communicate what it takes to engineer a tower. It crumbled to a pile of rubble. But on Pentecost, language becomes a tool for understanding rather than confusion. God's people speak in all the different tongues of the nations gathered, so that each person there could hear good news in a way they could understand. I have recently started Korean lessons on the app Duolingo. It is slow going, but I hope to be able to understand and communicate meaning from the sounds and syllables my neighbors speak. The universality of the Spirit calls us to move from strangers to siblings.

But as far as fire goes, that's a strange symbol. When I look at artwork of Pentecost, I see everything from tidy little flames resting above each head, as you see on the icon on today's bulletin cover, to a wild or abstract blaze that consumes the full image. It's a strange thing— fire— and yet that's in our cartography for how the Holy Spirit meets us.

So that makes me consider *how* that flame falls upon me, and upon each one of us. I believe calling has something to do with it. I have a friend whose youngest child is my daughter's age, and whose eldest child is graduating from high school in a few weeks. They invited me to a backyard party Friday night. Many of the people at the party also had graduating seniors. As I talked to these parents, I wanted to know not so much *whether or where* their kids were going to college next year; what I wanted to know was how they were handling— both generations of their households— the transition from this stage of life to the next.

These different parents did tell me about their kids' college and other plans— but not in a braggy way. Instead, they told me about how their daughter worked through a debilitating illness; that she made it to college at all was a celebration. A dad told me about how his daughter is finding her way through her parents' divorce. Another family told me of how their child is taking a sabbath year from school; this 17 year old needs time to finish growing. I was struck by the love I heard from each parent, and also each family's care for tending the spark that is within their children as they step into adulthood— and the amount of faith it takes to trust that there will be others who will kindle and blow on those embers, too.

“Ask me what I want to be, but not before you ask me who I want to be. Ask me who I want to be, but not before you ask me the more searing question of who I am.”

Cole Arthur Riley wrote these words in her book, “This Here Flesh,” and also cautions against narrowing an understanding of the Spirit's call down to what one chooses to do with their work

vocation. She describes her dad's spiritual gifts. He was a "wooer," a "seer of people" who "sees people in such a manner that they crave nearness to him." He could talk anyone into anything. He wanted to be an attorney and would have been good at it too, but those opportunities weren't available to him. Instead, as a youth and young man, he hustled: he shoveled snow, cut lawns... and rolled joints, turning \$30 into \$60 by 9 in the morning. Riley says "we cannot talk about work as calling without contending with the fact that there are those who have been denied choice, equity, and dignity in their work"<sup>2</sup>-- and does the Holy Spirit not call them?

One of the joys of watching the confirmation class over the course of the year is that as we get to know them and watch them come to know themselves better in relationship to their faith, we begin to see how that strange fire of the spirit is showing up in each one of them.

The fire of the Spirit's call isn't just for each individual believer. It's for the church as a whole, too. Pentecost presents an opportunity for us to reflect on the calling of the church. What fires are blazing with passion and energy? What is a cooling ember, already burned through its cycle of opportunity? What might be kindled, with a little wind or breath, so that it can grow from a spark to something that flames with wild fire?

Last week I finished watching the first season of a show I'm enjoying, called *Somebody, Somewhere* on HBO Max. Ok, if I am truly honest, I also began watching the first season last week-- it's that good, and also the episodes are that short. A woman, Sam, is living in a small, farming town in Kansas, having moved there to care for her sister during an illness that ended up taking her sister's life. Sam is left with her own life that has no sense of direction, no friends, no calling. However, in her drab job, she makes a friend-- Joel-- who meets her emptiness with fullness. Joel invites Sam to something he calls "Choir Practice." When Sam said, "I don't do church," Joel says, "Well, it's more church-adjacent." Sam decides to show up; this church, where Joel was the music director like Renée is for us, meets in a mall, where most of the shops and big-box stores had closed down and lie empty. But in this church-- which I was excited to see is Presbyterian-- choir practice isn't a church service, and it isn't actually a choir at all; instead it's an odd assortment of people, representing many gender and sexual identities gathering beneath a neon cross and share from their hearts: poetry, songs, dancing, life. There is such a feeling of welcome there that it starts to shape Sam's life into something that has meaning and purpose. The motley crew that attends "choir practice" have a way of looking at a character, who has come to feel like her fire has gone out, and finding that spark, and blowing wind on it so that it can burn bright. The odd thing is, we find out later, that Joel had never asked the Pastor or the Session for permission or endorsement to host this event he called "Choir Practice;" he just liberally used his church key to create this thing. But it probably had more Spirit and transformative power than anything that was happening on Sunday mornings. In a fit of guilt, he confesses to the pastor, gives back the key, and "Choir Practice" ends-- for the time being. Let's see what Season Two brings.

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<sup>2</sup> Cole Arthur Riley, *This Here Flesh: Spirituality, Liberation, and the Stories that Make Us*. New York: Convergent, 2022. Pp. 49-50.

Back to real life- I'm not sure how many Seasons there have been of church, but it does look like we are getting renewed again for another season. Following Pentecost, there are nearly six months of what we call in our liturgical season, "Ordinary time"-- not because it is boring compared to our penitential seasons of Advent and Lent, or because it lacks the joy of Christmas, the hope of Easter, or the fire of Pentecost. It's because during "ordinary time" we are to take the power of those seasons and holy days, and order them into our everyday lives. We are renewed for another season of church. The writers aren't even on strike.

So what will come of this strange fire in our church? Where do we need to move out the ash of what has already died out, to make room for new sparks and flames? In your lives, each one of you, find care for that fire. In our church, both inside these walls and outside these walls, may we find care for that fire and openness to its sourcing. May our faith guide us as we tend the hearth of our lives, so that the Spirit can find a hospitable place to be kindled.