

Pilgrim United Church of Christ
New Bedford, MA
Rev. David M. Hammett, Pastor

Pentecost Sunday
5-11-2008

Acts 2:1-21



"Light My Fire"

Do you know the artist who painted the image on the screen this morning? He's one of my favorite artists – Maxfield Parrish. The painting is, "Venetian Lamplighter", painted in 1925. It shows three people in a flat bottom boat, the woman in the bow reaching up to light a lamp on the top of a dock piling. It's a dreamy, romantic scene like most of Parrish's paintings, but depicts the simple chore of lighting lamps along the shore at dusk.

If you've ever captained a boat at night, you know how important the warning lights on the water and along the waterfront are. It gets really dark out there on the water and without those red and green channel markers and flashing buoys and lighthouses and dock lights, boats would be running aground all the time, especially in these rocky waters. I was lost on the water with a friend one night and remember how relieved we were to spot some channel markers which I was able to match up with our chart so we could find our way back home. It's a good thing someone lights those lights.

Who are the people in your life past and present who have kept the lights burning for you? ... the night light in the hall that Mom made sure never went

out, her stern words of caution, her soft words of encouragement, her guiding hand of experience. People of faith are God's lamplighters.

For fifty days following Christ's resurrection, Jesus' followers were lost in darkness and confusion. Some had seen the Lord and their stories of those encounters were filled with both wonder and fear. Others hadn't seen Jesus since he died on the cross. They all worried about the Romans and the religious authorities that conspired to have Jesus crucified – perhaps they would come for them next. Fifty uneasy, uncertain days of mixed emotions, but on Pentecost all that changed. When the day began they were behind closed doors, but the Holy Spirit came to where they were, rushed into that place like a mighty wind and settled on them like tongues of fire. Suddenly, they found they had the gift of communication and could speak the many languages of the cosmopolitan city of Jerusalem. Unafraid, filled with confidence, inspired by the Holy Spirit, they went out to proclaim the Good News of salvation in Jesus Christ. The Christian faith had its beginning, its purpose, its call. The Church was born.

Fire is used to refine precious metals. Heat melts the metal, allowing impurities to rise to the surface so they can be skimmed off. The remaining molten metal is pure and ready to be poured, to become something valuable and useful. This was a well known process to first century people and the first Christians understood the significance of the "tongues of fire" that came down upon them. They were a sign of God's Holy Spirit resting on them, forgiving them, purifying them, affirming their inherent value and preparing them for the work of God's kingdom. The fire of their faith would be the light of the world. They embodied the light of Christ.

And so do we.

Fifty days after the resurrection or two thousand years, so long as there is darkness in the world, Christians have the light of Christ to shine, Christ's Word to proclaim, Christ's Holy Spirit to share.

Have you stumbled in the dark? Have you been lost at sea? Has some good parent, some good person lighted a light of faith for you? Is there someone in some dark place waiting for the light you carry?

Tongues of fire, sparks of faith, the Holy Spirit fills this place, ready to rush into our lives and into the streets of this city to fill the lost and lonely, marginalized and broken with healing and hope.

When darkness falls, what lamps will we light?