



ST. STEPHEN'S ANGLICAN CHURCH

11856 MAYS CHAPEL RD., TIMONIUM, MD 21093

**Whitsunday (commonly known as Pentecost)
Sunday May 20, 2018**

✠ In The Name of The Father and of The Son and of The Holy Ghost. Amen.

The passage selected for the sermon is taken from the Book of Acts

Every man heard them speak in his own language, and they were amazed and marveled, saying one to another, Behold, are not all these who speak Galileans. How hear then we every man in our own tongue.....the wonderful works of God”

If you watched the wedding in England yesterday, you heard Bishop Curry include references to the civilizing gift of fire. It seems impossible that we wouldn't extend that imagery as we begin our meditation on Pentecost. Bishop Curry used the writing of Tai DeJardins, a Jesuit, as he discussed how fire warmed our homes, cooked our meat, fired our automobiles and even the jet that carried him to England. For Bishop Curry, that fire of civilization was like the fire of love that ignited a very public marriage, and even represented Christ and His Church.

With all due respect to Bishop Curry, he missed the opportunity that the proximity of Pentecost to the wedding really offered. It wasn't that fire of civilization that transformed the world. Instead, it was the fire of God, His Revelation of Himself and His will for us, spoken first from the burning bush to Moses, and ultimately through the Apostles at Pentecost that transformed fire from the simple tool of Man, to the ineffable purpose of God. The fire of civilization, man's fire, lit not only the hearth and the jumbo jet, but the rituals and temples of the blood thirsty and selfish gods who would devour men's

souls instead of redeeming them. In some cases, that very fire became the very idol of those atrocities.

But the fire of Pentecost is different. That fire, the revelation of God's purpose, and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in our earthly temples, is the Love that Bishop Curry should have expounded and embraced. The fire of Pentecost isn't harnessed for cooking and heating and moving jumbo jets. The fire of Pentecost powers lives of courage, truth, self-sacrifice; lives of godliness that make us more than we could ever be in the mere light of civilization's fire.

To help us understand the difference between earthly fire and Godly fire, we can look to two of the great gifts of "civilization" to our History, philosophy and the Olympics. We can find our civilization's fire prominently featured in each of these benign legacies. The foundation of our Western philosophy is the Greeks, and the foundation of Greek philosophy is Plato. Platonic belief we find most clearly explained in "the Cave".

The Cave is civilization built on man's self reliance and the aspirations of man to be God. The cave is shrouded in darkness and illumined by a fire. Life in the cave is lived within the light of that fire, and defined by that fire. At the edges and shadows of the fire is the unknown and fear. Civilization exists only in the frame of the firelight, self contained and small. Beyond the light is only terror. An intrepid philosopher dares to leave the ring of light and journeys to the mouth of the cave. Because his eyes

are so weakened from having had only the fire's illumination, when the philosopher encounters the sun, he is blinded. Nonetheless, he makes his way back to the fireside to share the news of the greater light, and of the potential for a life beyond the cave.

His reward is that he is killed. The people of the Cave's fire would rather live in the limitations of the firelight, and surrounded by fear of death and the unknown. There is no Resurrection, no Redemption. Civilization without the light of God is what we have in the world today, defined by corruption and the murder of children, and hatred masquerading as godly enlightenment. The fire of civilization cooks our bread, but cannot offer that bread brings the life of God to us, and gives us life in that God. The fire of civilization lights our homes and streets and the demonic electronic boxes that occupy our attention and time, but it does not enlighten us, show us our purpose or the purpose of loving each other in this world. It can power that jet that moves from continent to continent, but it fails and extinguishes at the boundary of the veil. It cannot illuminate the eternal light and life we are to inherit.

The fire of God, as revealed at Pentecost, is different in every way. It brings us knowledge of the Son instead of the fiery ball in the Center of our solar system. The Son brings sight to the physically blind, and in the gifts of Pentecost passed that power to the Apostles. More importantly, the fire of God brings insight. Understanding beyond the limitations our physical existence that extends the purpose of our creation, our purpose in our lives and with families we are given, our destiny to live in the perfected love of God forever. The fire of God dispels fear, and inspires courage. The Apostles give their lives to Christ and to their flock, persisting in their faith through death. **The light of civilization harbors murder in its shadows, but the fire of God reveals sacrifice and transcendent life.**

To touch the fire of civilization is dangerous if not deadly. To be touched by the fire of God is healing, grace filled, and life giving. The fire of Pentecost is God showering us with holy gifts and it is the charity that is practiced between us as those gifts are exercised.

Which might be my segue to the Olympics. To confess, I love the Olympics. I enjoy the throwing, the running, the swimming, the skating,

every kind of ball and sparring. I even love the new extreme sports we have recently added, golf, ping pong, badminton and curling. I am not so keen on the torch though.

The torch is passed from man to man across the world, finally culminating at the Olympic site. There some archer or Chinese acrobat fired out of a cannon leaps up to light the ultimate torch, symbolizing the best and highest ideal of not just a society, but the world.

What is that ideal we celebrate? Excellence in some temporal exercise. Sometimes teamwork. Often nationalism. Never amateurism. A single winner. Three medals. The rest of the field with only the joy of competing for a few seconds or minutes weighed against 4 years of personal and family sacrifice. For winners, the irony of watching their medals endure as their own bodies age and fail and die. That is the fire of civilization. That's the best we can do in this world, fleeting moments of glory in the face of death and darkness.

Contrast that with fire of God. Not a collective ideal perched above us for our aspirations, but gifts of grace, reflecting the ideal we can't imagine, falling upon us individually and perfectly. Grace that speaks so powerfully to our hearts that it overflows and is perfectly suited to be shared with the heart and tongue of everyone we encounter. Not a temporal glory to be hoarded against finite existence, but everlasting glory, flowing freely to those we love and which will persist past the bounds of this life and the eternity of the next.

The good Bishop is partly correct. God is love and God is in the fire. But the fire is the Holy Spirit, poured upon the church through the Apostles at Pentecost, and poured through that church into our lives through the Scriptures, the sacraments and our prayers. It is the fire that defies the shadows, and is not bound by the limits of this world. The fire of God is what lights the love that binds two people and everyone related to them, in Christian marriage. It is the fire that is the light of God that shines in us, inspires us, and transforms us. The fire of love is the Holy Spirit, in our church and in our hearts.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen