

Fire of God
May 11, 2008 (May 19, 1985)
Acts 2:1-21
preached by Rev. Wayne Irwin
in Centenary United Church,
Hamilton, Canada

Fire of God.

We know it today in our own experience.
And to describe it
we use the English word . . . "enthusiasm."

It points to the heresy
with which John Wesley and his followers
were charged.
Referring to a religious fervour
that was not governed by restraint.

And who was John Wesley?
The founder of the Christian movement
that birthed this Centenary community.
A priest of the church of England. 18th c.
Who found himself . . . unexpectedly . . .
filled with enthusiasm
for the proclamation of the Gospel.

Even though he had been ordained
and had journeyed overseas to Georgia
to do the work of the church there,
he had been torn inwardly
by the question of salvation. His own.
He had returned to England
very much aware of his personal failings.
And believing that if he had to be
good enough in God's eyes
to ever win his way to heaven
he knew he would never make it.

But it was a Moravian minister, a Peter Bohler,
who spoke the words
that triggered John Wesley' enlightenment,

who awakened him to the realization
that he need no longer struggle
to win God's approval.
That he need only trust
the love, the understanding . . .
the forgiveness of God.

And in his journal
he told the story of his awakening
this way:

In the evening of Wednesday, May 24th,
(This was in 1734) "I went very unwillingly
to a [Moravian society meeting]
in Aldersgate street
where [we were] reading Luther's preface
to the Epistle to the Romans.
About a quarter before nine,
while [the leader] was describing . . .
the change which God works in the heart
through faith in Christ . . .
I felt my heart . . . strangely warmed.
I felt I did trust in Christ,
Christ alone,
for salvation; . . .
and an assurance was given me
that he had taken away my sins,
even mine,
and saved me
from the law of sin and death."

John Wesley went on to found
the first widely successful Christian revival
in the United Kingdom,
travelling over 250,000 miles
by horseback to do it.

And his initiative ultimately spread
across the English speaking world
and beyond. Becoming the Methodist Church.
Driven by this passion
to communicate that good news.

As the Apostle Paul had put it
in his Epistle to the Romans: (11:6)
"If it is by grace,
it is no longer on the basis of works . . .
otherwise grace would no longer be grace."
Amazing grace!

And it was the Methodists
arriving here in Hamilton . . . in droves,
that birthed Centenary Church.

There were so many Methodists in the city
140 years ago
that on any given Sunday
there would be 5,000 of them
gathering for worship.

And this church was built, in essence,
to house the overflow.
The others could not contain them all.
Originally with fold-down seats in the aisles,
says the Hamilton Spectator
reporting on the dedication of this place:
"Room for 1500 seated
and 500 more standing."
Built because of enthusiasm
for the Gospel.
Built because of "the Fire of God!"

The Biblical text tells us
that the original followers of Jesus
underwent a communal charismatic experience.
First time they were all together
in one place,
after the resurrection.
Heard something that sounded like wind.
Saw something that looked like flames.
Reminiscent, surely, of Moses' experience
with the burning bush that was not consumed.

Whatever it was, they all experienced it.
Whatever it represented,

it's outcome was an enthusiasm
that settled on each one . . . and stayed there.

The prophet Joel had predicted it:

"I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh,
God declares."

The prophet Jeremiah had predicted it:

"The day is surely coming," (31:31f)

[says the Lord]

when I will make a new covenant
with my people . . .

I will put my law within them,
and I will write it on their hearts;
and will be their God,
and they shall be my people."

Jesus had predicted it,

saying to his disciples: (John 14:sel)

"I will ask . . .

and God will give you another Advocate
to be with you forever . . .

the Spirit of Truth . . . the Holy Spirit . . .

who will teach you everything,

and remind you of all that I have said to you."

And that is the nucleus

of the Word for this day . . .

not what was done because of this day . . .

but what was done . . . on this day.

On Pentecost Day . . .

On the "birth day" of the Church.

The followers of Jesus . . . all of them . . .

were imbued with an enthusiasm . . .

with the Fire of God.

And we know what that is. Each of us.

You know, yourself.

Think of a moment in your own experience

when you were

filled with the fire of enthusiasm.

It's very much like falling in love.
There is no limit
to the energy of the moment.
You'll do whatever seems right to do
with no regard for your limits.
And without reference
to whether or not it makes sense.

Like the love of a mother
for her child. . . It is a holy spirit.

When an emergency occurs, for example,
people respond . . . immediately . . .
sometimes without regard
for even their own safety . . .
for the sake of the other . . .
It is the work of the Holy Spirit.
It is the work of the "indwelling divinity"
that animates us all.

The response of the world
to the crisis in Myanmar (Burma)
is a very present communal example.
And the universal indignation
at the governing regime's foot-dragging,
apparently thinking its own survival
to be of more importance
than the survival of its people . . .
Another example.
The indignation of the Holy Spirit . . .
making visible the Fire of God.
That's how we all know
what's right . . . and what's not.

We celebrate today the enthusiasm
of this community of faith
spanning fourteen decades
of "labour for the Lord."

Why did those Methodists bother?
Why did they work so hard?
Building churches?

Teaching the tenets of the Gospel?
Why did they earn all their money . . .
and then give so much of it
for the work of the church?

Edward Jackson and others
giving a fortune to build this place.
Gibson Eccles
leaving everything in his estate . . .
over \$300,000.00
for the sake of supporting
students studying for the ordained ministry.
James Leslie Morrow
leaving over 3/4 of a million dollars
to Centenary
a portion of it designated
to support our music ministry here.

Martha Cartmell
giving her life to Japan
to support the education of girls
halfway around the world?
Why do it?

Because of enthusiasm.
Because of its benefit for life.
Not for their own life
but for the life of the world.
Because of their confidence
in the good news of God,
made visible in Jesus.
Because of that uncontrollable inner urging
to be a part of God loving this world.

And giving time, too, and expertise.
Volunteers galore . . . over the years . . .
just like today . . .
teaching, serving, contributing, labouring . . .
for the love of the Gospel . . .
for the sake of the children of God,
whoever they be . . .
wherever they live . . .

from wherever they come.

For years, the slogan
on Centenary's Sunday morning bulletin
bore words of Ralph Waldo Emerson:
"Nothing great is ever achieved
without enthusiasm."

There's that word again. Enthusiasm.

Said John Wesley, to his listeners:
"When you are on fire with enthusiasm,
people will come from miles around
to watch you burn."

That was the key
to the life and ministry of the Methodists.
And Centenary was a Methodist Church
until the day in 1925
when all the Methodists in Canada
and all the Congregationalists
and all the Union Churches on the prairies
and 70% of the Presbyterians
united to form The United Church of Canada.

You can tell this was a Methodist Church.
By its kneeling rail here at the front
for the Eucharist . . . for Holy Communion.

And today we celebrate
the 140 years of ministry
that have occurred
since this place was dedicated.
Centenary has an honourable history.
And its ministry . . . evolving . . .
changing to address the challenges of life
in the 21st century . . .
is strong
and focused both on the present
and the future.

Because of our enthusiasm.

Because of our passion.
Because what we do is a labour of love
for the sake of the world.

So let us celebrate our heritage,
and let us share in the joy and the privilege
of our ongoing association
with the Methodist legacy.

It is well expressed
in the Wesleyan exhortation:

"Do all the good you can . . .
by all the means you can . . .
in all the ways you can . . .
in all the places you can . . .
at all the times you can . . .
to all the people you can . . .
as long as ever you can."

"Fire of God, Undying Flame" . . .
it's a hymn text
written about 60 years ago . . .
for use in celebration of Christian enthusiasm.

We will sing
the first verse and the last . . .

Fire of God, undying flame,
Spirit who in splendour came,
let your heat my soul refine,
till it glows with love divine . . .

Love of God, your grace profound
knows not either age or bound:
come, my heart's own guest to be,
dwell for evermore in me.

Amen.