

The Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Sunday, August 14
The Rev. Denise Trogdon

Making Faith Matter

Take my words and speak through them, take our ears and hear through them, take our hearts and fill them with your fire, Amen.

Over the last ten days, like many, I have been following the summer Olympics. More than the competitions, I'm drawn to the personal stories of the athletes. It's fascinating to learn what inspires someone to push beyond their physical limits, to persevere despite adversity and defeats. Most of these young men and women have struggled, sacrificed and faced countless challenges along the way. Though the Olympic experience is fiercely competitive, it's also an opportunity to live a vision and be a part of something greater.

From the comfort of our living rooms we witness a lifetime of work distilled into seconds, and the disappointment or jubilation that hinge on one performance. Just for a moment, their passion becomes ours and we encounter a feeling of total engagement, complete commitment; a heart willing to risk it all. There is fire in the belly of these extraordinary athletes. It makes me wonder where that fire is for each of us. If in our busy lives we skim the surface of our experiences, we miss the heart and vision that inspire us.

When I first read the gospel text for this morning, I wanted to preach on something else. These verses about Jesus bringing conflict and division are not easy for us to hear. I want the text to fit the image I have of Christ as the ultimate peacemaker, the one who heals and reconciles. But Jesus is also the ultimate truth teller, sometimes waking us from our complacency or even apathy. These attributes can insidiously set in on the treadmill of life we've created. This prophetic voice is meant to shock us, to question and demand that we re-evaluate our lives and make our faith matter.

Jesus said, "I came to bring fire to the earth and how I wish it were already kindled." He was speaking to a community living under Roman induced peace. While there might have been an absence of war, many groups were oppressed, forced to use a language not their own, prohibited from many of their religious practices. When Luke wrote this gospel years later, Christians were being persecuted. To have a Christian in the family was dangerous business, creating conflict and divisions among its members. Jesus set the stage for his followers to experience rupture in relationships with those who would simply follow the status quo. No one tangled with powers that be and left unscathed. Ask our many brothers and sisters who have spent their lives challenging injustices of their time.

What is this fire that Jesus speaks of? Is it a fire of judgement on a sinful people we hear about in the Old Testament? Is it the fire of God's presence as in the transfiguration story, or the inspiring tongues of fire of the Spirit of Pentecost? Fire both burns and refines us. Fourth Century Bishop Ambrose said, "The fire of love consumes whatever is material and earthly, but tests whatever is pure." This purifying fire Jesus references burns away notions that religion is meant to be simply a source of comfort. The flame of love breaks the heart and is the instrument of transformation. With this fire Jesus inflames the hearts of his disciples.

Theologian and writer Barbra Brown Taylor writes about the hard messages of Christ in her book, Bread of Angels. She muses that Christ would not have made a very good parish priest, noting that in the modern church we do our best to make church inviting, where people feel their needs will be met. We tame messages that are disruptive, work hard to make programs appealing

and provide plenty of opportunities for fellowship and service. But we don't often prepare people for the costs of being a disciple in a world that can be hurtful, rejecting and violent. What if faith wasn't about a future in heaven that would be peaceful but rather an invitation to live differently now, to effect change in those places of injustice?

Living in a time and place where we are free to practice our religion can make us lukewarm about our faith. Jesus' words come today to challenge us, to stoke the fire of passion and actually take our faith into a world that is hurting and divided. We can watch from the comfort of our living rooms or take the risks that following Jesus requires. I invite you to ask yourselves, why do I come to this place? Is it to find belonging and comfort? Do I expect that membership has its privileges and services? Could this also be a place of preparation to live our faith outside these walls? Our baptism kindles the heart and if stoked creates fire in the belly.

The passage in Paul's letter to the Hebrews this morning recounts the costs faithful disciples have paid to run the race in the face of adversity. The writer urges us to look to the life of Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith to persevere through the difficult moments. One who has given it all has gone before us to set the pace, to encourage us to hold fast to our greater purpose. When we encounter adversity, our faith is meant to keep us focused on this vision.

Tomorrow nine of us will embark upon a journey outside these walls to join our brothers and sisters in the work of the kingdom. No, we will not be preaching or teaching the gospel among many who are of differing faiths in Tanzania. We will be living Christ's imperative to care for our neighbors and try in the little ways possible to make a difference to the injustices of poverty. I pray that our encounters will stoke our fires for Christ's love and transform us to live more intentionally the greater vision of God's kingdom.

Sitting in church on a Sunday costs us little if that is the sum total of our Christian experience. I pray that each of us will leave the comfort of our living rooms and push beyond our limits to allow God to work in us and make our faith matter. The fire is kindled friends. Let's make church a place where we stoke those embers and prepare to meet the challenges of the race before us. I leave you today thanking you for your prayers and offer this Franciscan benediction:

May God bless us with discomfort
At easy answers, half-truths, and superficial relationships
So that we may live from deep within our hearts.

May God bless us with anger
At injustice, oppression, and exploitation of God's creations
So that we may work for justice, freedom, and peace.

May God bless us with tears
To shed for those who suffer pain, rejection, hunger, and war,
So that we may reach out our hands to comfort them and
To turn their pain into joy.

And may God bless us with just enough foolishness
To believe that we can make a difference in the world,
So that we can do what others claim cannot be done. Amen.