

Flame Seekers

The whirlwind of everything that happened when the Spirit blew in on that Pentecost had to have kept people buzzing for a few weeks at least. The end of chapter 2 tells us that after Peter finished preaching:

God brought about three thousand people into the community on that day.

That day about three thousand took him at his word, were baptized and were signed up. They committed themselves to the teaching of the apostles, the life together, the common meal, and the prayers.

Everyone around was in awe—all those wonders and signs done through the apostles! And all the believers lived in a wonderful harmony, holding everything in common. They sold whatever they owned and pooled their resources so that each person's need was met. They followed a daily discipline of worship in the Temple followed by meals at home, every meal a celebration, exuberant and joyful, as they praised God. People in general liked what they saw. Every day their number grew as God added those who were saved.¹

Peter continues to preach and winds up healing a man sitting at the Temple gate. Peter and John are then thrown in jail. They testify in front of the leaders, and are then released when the leaders cannot figure out a way to charge them with any crime. They head back to the fledgling community and preach some more:

While they were praying, the place where they were meeting trembled and shook. They were all filled with the Holy Spirit and continued to speak God's Word with fearless confidence.²

Acts goes on to tell us that everyone was of one mind, that everyone shared everything, that no one was in need, that all was great and grand and glorious. But then there are those who are not completely sold on the selling everything you own and placing the money in the apostles' hands. They lie about holding some money back and then pay with their lives when they die on the spot. But that seems to be a one-off, an anomaly and everything goes back to being hunky dory. That's how we imagine the early church, right? Yes, there is persecution, but

¹ Acts 2:42-47, *The Message*

² Acts 3: 31, *The Message*

there is also tremendous faith and astounding growth and everyone holds hands and sings kumbaya and gets along swimmingly, right? [Read Acts 6:1-8]

Huh. So we're only in chapter 6, the authorities are breathing down the church's neck, and yet, there is grumbling. Not serious grumbling, of course, but some dissatisfaction with how the leaders are handling everything. And the ones pointing out the problems are not the apostles, not the first round draft picks, the inner circle, but the newbies. The Greek-speaking members have come in on the Holy Spirit's wave. They have signed on for all that the first believers have, and yet they see some holes in the plan, and they point them out. And the apostles respond by calling a meeting. We laughed in bible study that they sound like good Presbyterians creating a committee, but I think it matters that they do not brush off the concern or get defensive about the complaints. Instead they gather the community to address it. In fact they seem to welcome the concern, acknowledging that the task of leading is a big one and that they need help. So they invite the community to choose seven trusted people—men, in this case—“full of the Holy Spirit and good sense,” our translation says. The leaders do not hand pick some favorites, nor do they simply ask for volunteers. Instead they invite the community to do the work of seek out the ones who should serve in this role.

It makes me wonder how they went about it. Did they flip through the new directory and throw out names? Did they ask around, see who might be available or not too busy? It would have been nice if the Holy Spirit had rumbled in again and re-ignited flames over their heads, to make the job easier. It would be so great if there were a giant hand or a glowing sign, saying “Stephen is the man you are looking for,” or even a booming voice saying, “Procurus and Nicolas would be terrific.” But it's not that straightforward, because the truth is that the Spirit has already woven its way in and through all of them. No, it is the community that must discern who is a good fit for this work. The community has to go find the flame, to seek out trusted members of the community who will lead this expanding ministry. Notice that they are not sent to find the best cooks, the finest table scrubbers, or the top kitchen manager. They are not sent out to find skill sets; they are sent out to find people, trusted members of the community who can help the church thrive and grow. The flames are not burning quite as brightly now. The rush of Pentecost has subsided. Things are not as exciting or frenetic at least, so the flames may be more difficult to see. But the flames are there.

I wonder if Stephen or Procurus or Timon knew they had a special calling before the larger community tapped them for this task. There are debates these days about helping our children find their special gift, their talent, their passion. And yet here, the second-round draft picks are chosen not because of any specific skill set but because they are well-respected and wise, trusted members of the community. And someone somewhere sees that they can be leaders even though theirs are not household names. They are not necessarily the shining stars but solid citizens, faithful ones who help expand the reach of the good news, who live Christ's calling to care for the least of these and help the community do that well.

But in order to set them apart for this work, the community has to know them, to know each other. And somehow even with thousands in their ranks, and more joining daily, they do. At a recent meeting I sat with leaders from other churches and the question of call came up. Pastors love to talk call stories. We get lots of practice talking about them as we move through the ordination process, and when we interview for various positions. The two men I was talking to both have both held leadership positions in their congregation for a while. And yet they were reluctant to say they were called to this work, which left me sad somehow. Yes, they have very practical job descriptions such as making sure the budget balances and the parking lot is clear in the winter, but they are also leaders of a spiritual community. And yet, at no time have they been told they were called to this work. Elected, yes. Chosen, maybe. Drafted, cajoled, possibly. But they have been called. The Holy Spirit did not stop with the apostles or even with Stephen and the holy kitchen crew. Stephen waits tables but he also preaches and testifies to the power of resurrection. Stephen will go on to be the church's first martyr, but without the community's tapping him for this position, his voice might not have gotten a hearing. The Holy Spirit does not dance only on the heads of the ones who wear stoles or go to seminary or on those who have served in specific roles for ages or who have reached a certain age. The Holy Spirit does not really respect such arbitrary boundaries, but we have forgotten to tell each other that.

A huge piece of my call story is found in the voices of people who pulled me aside or tapped me on the shoulder and suggested I give things a try. Theirs were voices in the community whom I trusted. I listened to them stunned because they seemed to trust me and see something in me, too. I think of Gordon my English teacher and soccer coach, who also happened to be my youth group advisor. He put me on the mailing list at a

seminary admissions office when I was a senior in college, and smiled smugly when I wondered aloud with him about going to seminary. I think of Linda, a revered older pastor in the presbytery who nudged me to accept a position that would require me to preach every Sunday, something I had never done before. I think of my grandmother who was overjoyed at my heading to seminary, the woman who to this day tells me I am a smart little girl. There are so many others, so many faces and voices who have pointed out the flame dancing on my shoulder when I was too dim to notice or too hesitant to follow where it might lead. Can you remember when someone noticed something in you? When someone nudged or invited or called you to serve in some way?

I think it's a crucial and holy act for the community to embrace. There are forms sitting at the information center for you to suggest names to the nominating committee for the coming year, but this is about more than filling a few slots on a slate. What if we embraced the call to be a flame seeking community? What if we became intent on getting to know one another, intent on calling out the gifts in one another? It is tempting to focus on who I am supposed to be and do. I can easily forget that mine is one of the voices others need to hear, that it is my job, our job to remind each other that the flames have danced in, around, through, and on all of us. My flame can be hard to see when I am feeling tired, alone, inadequate, or frustrated. I need those voices to call me out, to point out the flame dancing on my shoulder again. I think we all do.

As we gathered for our first Fabulous Friday two days ago, we made flames on Popsicle sticks, a great old-school church craft. And we took a picture, where we held the flame not over our own heads but over the head of someone else. It felt a bit silly, but there is nothing silly about the flames. In fact, there is something deeply important about the old school calling that this old school craft points to. The church still has important holy work to do. Yes, there are budgets to be balanced and bills to be paid, but there is also good news to be shared with a hurting world, and that job belongs to each and every one of us. The church is still called to speak out and up when children are suffering, to be vigilant when tyrants are on the loose. Since her earliest moments, the church has been tapping each other on the shoulder to encourage each other in the holy work of being the body of Christ, serving tables and giving rides, installing drywall and organizing music, looking out for widows and preaching the good news. It is holy work, all of it. And we have what we need to pull it off. We simply need to keep looking for the flames. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.