

Fire and ice serve about as well as any natural elements in representing the extremities, the polarities, of the universe and of human life. We've been learning since we were babies that some things are hot and some things are cold, and that it's helpful to have information about this before you touch things. When we want to communicate that something is very, very cold we say it's as cold as ice. Fire and ice.

In the inner world of the human being, fire is usually associated with desire, with passion, with intense emotion. You may be familiar with that piece of music written in 1967 that illustrates this perfectly. For those of you unschooled in serious music, it's refrain goes, "C'mon, baby, light my fire."

Ice, on the other hand, is usually associated with the absence of desire or passion, with at least disinterest, maybe disdain, and perhaps even hatred. We're all familiar with such negative terms of communication as the "icy stare" and the "cold shoulder" and the "chilly reception." Like the man who wrote an alimony check on one of his shirts, i.e., giving his ex-wife literally the "shirt off his back." She was said to be "frosted."

An effective way of categorizing relationships is by their temperature. Two people in the fresh blush of romantic love may be said to be "burning up" for each other. The first stage of romantic or erotic love sizzles with hot feelings or passions. It's like two people have taken a fever-causing narcotic. Some people bemoan the fact that this condition doesn't last. They should thank God it doesn't last. Who could survive long in this condition?

Let's suppose, however, that two people in love have a spat, one of those that puts dark clouds in the sky for days. Friends and family members will say things like, "I think that relationship has cooled off."

If a couple makes a marriage out of their love, if the relationship becomes long-term and lifelong, then they'll need to find a proper temperature somewhere between fire and ice. Warm is commendable for the daily life of a marriage. Of course there ought to be times when the temperature rises and something of the original passions are recovered. Yet, for better or for worse, the temperature will drop periodically, and it can get colder in a marriage than almost anywhere else. But for the day-to-day life together, warm is good. Over the long haul, what most of us really want in our relationships of companionship and love is warmth. The warmth of acceptance and understanding. The warmth of devotion and care.

We celebrate the church's birthday today; the church began with fire. Fire from heaven. Celestial fire. The symbolism of the story is potent.

Following the story of the ascension of Jesus, the scripture states that the disciples went back to Jerusalem to do what Jesus had instructed them to do: to wait. They went to an upper room, which is where they stayed in Jerusalem. Remember, they were Galileans. They had no place of their own in Jerusalem. This is presumably the same upper room in which Jesus had the last supper with his disciples.

On the Jewish calendar, Pentecost is fifty days after Passover and was one of the three great Jewish festivals. The event we commemorate today occurred on the day of Pentecost, rather early in the morning. There was a noise, as the story states, like that of a strong, driving wind. Then suddenly there was fire! Tongues like flames of fire appeared and rested on each person present, the story states. This fire of God's Spirit ignited a miracle, as the disciples began to speak in "other tongues." Not unknown tongues, the author of the book of Acts states. This wasn't gibberish, or merely ecstatic speech. They spoke in "other tongues." And people who were in Jerusalem from all over the Mediterranean world heard in their own languages what the disciples were saying.

An interesting image! It was quite a meeting. Christians have been trying to have one like it ever since. What you find in the book of Acts is that the church began in a phenomenal kaleidoscope of sights and sounds. It was a bursting, cataclysmic manifestation of the Holy Spirit. But it was a unique event, not a normative one.

Such excitement often accompanies beginning relationships. The new community of God's people needed a birthing stage. They needed objective evidence of the presence of God's Spirit in a way it would never need it again. But the church was never meant to stay at Pentecost.

Read on in Acts and you discover that extraordinary instances of the Holy Spirit's manifestations become like a declining angle. No more sounds like rushing wind. No more tongues of fire. In the book of Acts the Holy Spirit of God becomes less a source of ecstatic experiences and more a problem-solver in the day-to-day life of the believers.

In Galatians 5, Paul writes that the "fruit" or "harvest" of the spirit is "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control." No mention of ecstasy or speaking in tongues is made as part of the harvest of the Spirit.

In 1 Corinthians 13, Paul makes it abundantly clear that the supreme and overriding gift of the Holy Spirit is love. Paul wanted the Corinthian Christians to know that speaking in tongues, even if it is a sign of the Holy Spirit, was of little value in comparison with the Spirit's other gifts.

Religious history is filled with individuals or groups claiming to be speaking for God's Spirit, but later events have proved them false.

For example, and one of my favorite stories concerns the early days of 1524, when the people of London were told that the city was doomed. Crowds of anxious people of every social class gathered to listen to numerous astrologers

and fortune tellers, all of whom claimed to have God's spirit speaking through them. God's Spirit had revealed to them that on February 1, the Thames River would rise from its banks, engulf the entire city and sweep away 10,000 homes.

The vision was described in terrifying detail to increasingly larger groups. It had started the preceding June, when a few individuals began to make that prediction and the rumors spread. Month after month, the warnings were repeated with total assurance and as time passed, they became accepted by most of the population, even though the Thames had been the most docile of rivers.

At first only a handful of families began to leave the city, but as the time grew near, people left in ever-increasing numbers. Long streams of poor families and individuals tramped the muddy roads to higher ground, 15 to 20 miles away. They were joined by more prosperous neighbors whose horse-drawn carts were piled high with their possessions. Nobles and clergy followed suit, fleeing to safe country estates. By the middle of January, over 20,000 people had left the city. London was rapidly becoming a ghost town. When the ill-fated day arrived, some braver souls stayed behind to watch. The soothsayers had predicted that the river would rise slowly, allowing those who could run fast enough to escape. The hour finally came, and to the consternation of the watchers, nothing happened. The tide quietly ebbed and flowed, as it always had. An awareness slowly swept over the good people that they had been had.

The next morning with the Thames continuing to flow peacefully within its banks, the crowd, joined by the evacuees, was boiling with fury. Many wanted to throw the soothsayers into the river. Fortunately, the prophets were prepared. In a clever maneuver, seemingly not lost on present-day predictors of future events, they said they had scrupulously re-checked their calculations the previous night and found a small error. London was almost certainly doomed, the signs were

undeniably right. But because of a minor oversight, the great flood would occur in 1624 not 1524. The good townspeople could go home and be safe for at least 100 more years.

In our own country up until this day there are some small church groups that practice snake handling as one test of whether or not an individual possesses the Holy Spirit. If you could handle a poisonous snake and not be bitten and did not die, this was proof that you had the Holy Spirit.

So how can we tell, in the midst of conflicting voices, which is of God and which is not? Some of the usual tests aren't sufficient. For example, merely because a group is fast-growing or successful in the short run doesn't mean it has the truth. The churches that cooperated and blessed what Hitler was doing in Germany in the 1930's were prospering, while the "anti-Nazi" church was small, suspect, and persecuted. Often the one who cries out, "The Emperor has no clothes," isn't listened to, but shouted down and often killed. The churches in this country that continued to bless slavery and later segregation and the status quo, often prospered, while those who challenged slavery and the segregation which followed, suffered.

May I share with you what I have come to believe Pentecost was? I believe Pentecost, the birthday of the church, was a dramatic sign of the universality of the word of God. It shows what the Spirit's work will be: namely, bringing all people to a unity of understanding. Remember how Jesus said, "And I, if I be lifted up, will draw people unto me?" God's Spirit is always calling us to wholeness and to seeing the world and the creation as interdependent. God's Spirit is that which draws us out of ourselves and helps us to see our connections with other people who are different from us, and to recognize our connection with all of creation. So work at thinking of the Holy Spirit, not so much as a source of

supernatural phenomena and ecstatic experiences, and more as an energy of love among Christ's people as well as other people.

The Holy Spirit is the fire of God that warms our cold hearts toward each other and toward all for whom Christ died. The Holy Spirit is the fire that stands over the ice of our small-heartedness and selfishness and deadness. Within our depths the fire burns, and our greatest sin is that we try to quench it.

Beware of someone or some group which claims to have all the truth and the only truth –BEWARE! Jesus said the Spirit of God or Holy Spirit is like the wind. It blows where it will and it can't be controlled or monopolized by any one person, religion, or group. That means that a person or group that is being led by God's Spirit is open to new possibilities, new truth, new discoveries and isn't afraid of the latest Biblical research or threatened by new scientific theories. As Pastor John Robinson told our Pilgrim fathers and mothers, "The Lord has yet more light and truth to break forth from the word."

This is the critical issue. The fire burns in us, not to produce self-centered ecstasy, but to produce love. We focus on Pentecost morning, but may not even know what happened that evening. It was an economic miracle of love. "And all who believed were together and had all things in common; and they sold their possessions and goods and distributed them to all, as any had need." Maybe that is how we should think of the Holy Spirit: "As you did it to one of the least of those my brothers, you did it to me."

Some years ago the movie, "Driving Miss Daisy" came out. Miss Daisy was a very proper Southern woman who was growing older and not taking it very well. She especially resented the black man who was hired to do her driving for her. His presence was too strong a reminder that she must become more and more dependent on others and less self-reliant. There were also the complications that

existed between blacks and whites in the world of Atlanta half a century ago. The black man, Hoak, was good-natured and patient, and he did the best he could.

Finally, the time came when Miss Daisy had to be put in a nursing home. Hoak, growing older himself, accompanied Miss Daisy's son on a visit to see her. In a touching closing scene, they're at a dining table in the nursing homes. Miss daisy is extremely weak. Hoak, the faithful servant, moves easily to this once-proud Southern woman, takes a fork in his big hand, and begins feeding her a piece of pie. She accepts it as a child would from a parent or a friend from a friend. All the ice of a once-frozen relationship has melted and is gone.

I have known people who are full of the Holy Spirit, true Pentacostals. How did I know that they were? Because I found the "fruit" of the Spirit in the way they related to me and to others. The fire is there in you too; ignite it, and warm all our hearts.