**Pentecost Sunday, Year B, May 27, 2012 – Faith Lutheran, Radcliff, KY**

**Based on Acts 2:1-21 written by Pastor Paul Horn**

**“Be filled with the fire of the Holy Spirit”**

I distinctly remember walking to the grocery store with my parents one Memorial Day Weekend. Outside of the doors of the grocery store was an old gentleman, with a warm smile on his face, VFW cap on his head, sitting on a metal folding chair, with a little table in front of him. He was selling tiny artificial flowers, attached to a green stem that you could wind around a button on your shirt. I remember my parents purchasing a flower, one each for me and my sisters, and I wore it, but no one ever explained it significance to me.

It was not until I recently read a poem written by Moina Michael in 1915, that I began to understand:

*We cherish too, the Poppy red
That grows on fields where valor led,
It seems to signal to the skies
That blood of heroes never dies.*

Moina Michael began selling red poppies in 1915 in New York City to honor those who died serving our nation during war. The red of the field flower symbolizes the blood of our nation’s heroes, who have died defending our country.

You might have noticed today the color red: the red stole around my neck and the red banners hanging from the walls. The color red is assigned to the day of Pentecost. We will get to the significance of the color in a minute, first allow me to explain Pentecost. Pentecost was an Old Testament celebration, just like Passover. Remember that the Jews celebrated the Passover to remember how the LORD delivered his people Israel from the tenth plague in Egypt: the angel of death. The angel passed over those homes that had painted the blood of a lamb on the door frame. Passover was an annual remembrance for the Jews to thank God for delivering his people from slavery in Egypt. Remember that Jesus, the true Passover Lamb, died on the Friday of Passover Week.

50 days after Passover the LORD wanted his people to return to Jerusalem to celebrate Pentecost. On Pentecost the Jews offered their firstfruits to the LORD: offerings of new grain from the harvest, burnt offerings of lambs, bulls and rams. They gave freewill offerings to the LORD in proportion to the blessings the LORD had given them. Just as we offer to the Lord the best and first offerings of our time, money and abilities today. It is also very appropriate that Memorial Day Weekend falls on Pentecost Sunday. Today we have opportunity to thank God for the men and women who offered their best, their very lives, while serving our country.

Now to the significance of the color red and its connection to Pentecost. Red symbolizes zeal, eagerness, passion, enthusiasm, fervor. Today on the day of Pentecost we witnessed zeal and passion. 10 days after Jesus’ ascension, Luke tells us that the apostles were gathered together in a house in Jerusalem. They were waiting for the gift Jesus had promised: a special outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Suddenly the sound of a violent wind filled the whole house, it certainly would get the attention and curiosity of anyone near that house, hearing the noise of a tornado force wind but not feeling anything. And suddenly tongues of fire appeared and danced on the top of each of the heads of the apostles.

In the Bible fire symbolizes the presence of God. Do you remember how the LORD led the people of Israel out of Egypt through the wilderness? With a giant pillar of cloud by daylight and pillar of fire at night - a visible reminder that he was with his people. The Holy Spirit gave visible evidence that he was present among the apostles with the wind and with the fire. The red fire symbolized the burning fire the Holy Spirit ignited inside each of the disciples. He gave them special gifts: the ability to speak in other foreign languages and a keen understanding of the Scriptures. But perhaps most noticeably, the fire of enthusiasm and courage to talk about Jesus and his sacrifice of blood.

The color red reminds of the victorious truth of Christian teaching based on the blood of Christ – that by the blood of the Lamb of God the sins of the whole world have been forgiven. The Holy Spirit emboldened the Apostle Peter to proclaim this truth in front of thousands of strangers in Jerusalem. Peter preached to Jews from every nation about the sufferings, death, resurrection and ascension of their Savior, Jesus Christ, as Luke said, “Declaring the wonders of God!” (vs11)

The Holy Spirit also revealed his presence and power by working on the hearts of those people in Jerusalem. After hearing all that Jesus had done for them, the Holy Spirit opened their hearts so that they believed Peter’s words. Luke later tells us at the end of chapter two, 3,000 were baptized on that day. The Holy Spirit planted the seed of faith and new life into 3,000 souls. A great day for the Lord! But as we read further in the book of Acts, not every day was a day of public proclamation and mass conversions. Unbelievers violently opposed the message of Jesus Christ crucified and risen. They persecuted the Christians, arrested them, stoned them to death and beheaded them.

And that is why the color red also symbolizes martyrdom: a martyr is a Christian who suffers death as a penalty for refusing to deny their faith in Christ Jesus. History tells us that all of the apostles, with the exception of the Apostle John, were murdered defending their faith in Jesus. In his revelation of heaven, the apostle John saw the martyrs in heaven, **and a loud voice said, “They did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death**.” (Rev 12:11) The fire of the Holy Spirit working through his Word emboldens Christians.

I got to thinking this week, “How does a Christian get to that maturity level in their faith life where they would rather not deny Christ, but would be willing to give up all, even die for him? Who does that?” The answer is: all of you! All of you have reached that maturity level! When you became members of this congregation you stood before God and this body and were asked the question, “Do you intend to continue steadfast in the true Christian faith, be diligent in the use of God’s Word and Sacraments, and lead a godly life, even to death?” You all answered, “I do and I ask God to help me.” That confidence comes from the fire of the Holy Spirit.

But some days it doesn’t feel that the fire of the Holy Spirit is burning inside of you, does it? About three times a year I attend pastors’ conferences with about 36 other pastors and annually a district pastors’ convention with over 200 pastors. We worship together, listen to papers written by those pastors on doctrine, church history and practical pastoral care, and conduct business. The purpose of these conferences is to be renewed by fellowship with other pastors, to be strengthened by worship and Bible study together, to return home eager and ready to do ministry with the fire of the Holy Spirit. But… sometimes the speakers are not as dynamic as you’d hoped. Sometimes the papers are dull and don’t really apply to your congregation. Sometimes the business part of conference can be boring. Sometimes, even for pastors, the fire of the Holy Spirit doesn’t seem to be burning – sometimes it’s because we put it out.

Do you have days like that, where you’re just having an off day spiritually? The last thing you’re ready to do is give a clear confession of faith to the Jehovah’s Witness or Mormon missionaries who ring your doorbell. Some days the fire of the Holy Spirit doesn’t seem to be burning too strongly when family gets together and you don’t feel like offending your guests and so staying home instead of going to church seems like a better idea. Other days the fire of the Holy Spirit seems more like a 4th of July sparkler than a roaring fire when you say to your friend who has just engaged you in a religious discussion, “Let’s just agree to disagree,” rather than making a firm confession of faith based on Scripture. Sometimes the fire isn’t burning because we put it out.

A few years ago I was walking with another pastor to the building where our district pastors’ convention was held, and we were discussing the day’s agenda and groaning about some of the presentations, when he turned and said to me, “But we’re going to do battle against Satan today.” Isn’t that what pastors do when they gather for conferences? There the Holy Spirit declares the wonders of God through worship and Bible study and doctrinal papers that are read. There the Holy Spirit points us to Christ the Lamb of God who shed his blood for the sins of the world. Even pastors need to hear that Word proclaimed to them, so that they know Jesus has forgiven them of their sins, yes for their sins of putting out the Spirit’s fire. And by hearing the good news of Jesus, the Holy Spirit empowers us to battle against Satan – to preach with the sword of truth against the Satan’s lies, to extinguish the flaming arrows of Satan’s attacks with the shield of faith.

Isn’t that why we are here today? To hear that Jesus Christ willingly laid down his life on the field of battle and shed his red blood so that we might know we are forgiven for the times we’ve put out the Spirit’s fire. Here we learn to fight against the temptation to lay down our swords of the Word of God. This is the place, in God’s Word and in his Sacraments, where the fire of the Holy Spirit burns in us.

This is why we have our children baptized - there the Holy Spirit first ignited that spark fire of faith in their spiritually dead hearts. This is why you parents and grandparents bring your children to Sunday school and catechism class – there the Holy Spirit stokes the fire of faith in their hearts. This is why we gather for worship – here the Holy Spirit points us to the blood of Christ crucified, which extinguishes the fire of a guilty conscience. This is why we approach the Table as often as it is offered – here the Holy Spirit pumps the bellows to cause a raging fire inside of us. Fueled by Christ’s forgiveness the Holy Spirit empowers us and emboldens us to go out and proclaim the wonders of God. This is why we take time daily to study God’s Word in our homes – there the Holy Spirit stokes the fire of faith in you.

So tomorrow when you see the color red, on an American flag or a flower, pause and thank God for those who willingly took the oath, who wore the boots and the uniform, who laid down their lives for this country. Today and every day you see the color red thank God for the blood of the One who laid down his life to defend you, so that you now have the forgiveness of your sins and eternal life in heaven. May that color red remind you of the One who began the fire of faith in your heart at your baptism, who now continues to stoke that fire in you through his Word. On this Pentecost Sunday, and every day, allow the Holy Spirit to fill you with his fire through his Word and Sacraments. And then… fire up and march into battle. Amen!