

## **“Encouragement and Correction”**

**Pastor Dave Carlson  
First Presbyterian Church  
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**New Testament Lesson: Luke 3:15-17, 21-22**

**Old Testament Lesson: Isaiah 43: 1- 3**

“His winnowing-fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing-floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

Joy upon joy! Who here signed up to be wheat gathered into a granary while the chaff is burned in unquenchable fire – or worse yet, who wants to be the chaff!?! That’s not an aspect of our faith / am completely comfortable with, nor should anyone be.

We should all be uncomfortable knowing that there’s both “wheat” and “chaff” in this world, *and* that often we don’t know which is which, who is who, or how to respond when we get hit by a cloud of flying “chaff.”

Does everyone know what chaff is – it’s the outer shell from a grain of wheat. The harvesters would toss the wheat into the air using their winnowing-forks. Then the heavy kernel of wheat would fall to the ground while the useless outer shell of chaff would fly off in another direction, to be collected and burned.

It’s as if Jesus is saying we have clouds of chaff surrounding us, clouds of useless stuff, assuming we indeed are wheat, at least somewhere deep down inside, if not outwardly wheat, or just beneath the surface wheat. Of course wheat his healthily and good and fruitful, and who doesn’t want to be that?

The problem is we are all a little wheat and a little chaff, or a lot wheat, or a lot chaff. We become a big pile of chaff sometimes, don’t we, depending on what’s happening around us at the time compared to where we are in our own spiritual growth?

Luke begins his account of Jesus’ baptism saying this: “As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, John answered all of them by saying, ‘I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.’”

What is it to be baptized with the Holy Spirit and with fire? And what does that have to do with gathering the wheat and burning away the chaff? Really, they are one-in-the-same. While Baptism happens in an instant, it’s really a life-long process of God forming us as Christians. Sure, we as Presbyterians believe in and celebrate one baptism.

But we also believe that the effects of that baptism are lived out over the lifetime of an individual, in the company of the church.

Writer and theologian Dorothee Soelle uses a metaphor of total disarmament and total nakedness based on the following passage in Genesis 2:25: “And the man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed.”<sup>1</sup>

That’s what living into our baptism provides us. We have the opportunity as Christians to stand unashamed before God and neighbor, as long as we are continually living into our baptism. To continually live into your baptism means being open to having chaff – the useless part of yourself – shaken off and burned away. The problem with this is, the chaff is part of us – this useless, rebellious, self-righteous, holier than Thou part of us that comes out most forcefully when we’re threatened, or attacked, or afraid, or hungry, or left wanting, or overlooked, or undervalued, or ... you name it. You know what brings out the worst in you, just as well as I know what can bring out the worst in me. We all do.

The Rev. James A. Harnish tells the story about “an English bishop who visited a sleepy little parish along the river Thames. The village priest was discouraged and depressed. Finally, the priest confessed, ‘Bishop, I can’t say that we are setting the Thames on fire.’ The bishop looked him sternly in the eye and said, ‘Young man, I am not the least bit concerned about setting the Thames on fire. What I want to know is, if I take you out and drop you in it, will you sizzle?’<sup>2</sup>

You laugh. But the question remains, will you sizzle? Will I? Will our church? Is our faith burning bright enough that when we are doused with water, somewhere up in heaven God hears a happy little sizzle because we’re so on fire for the faith?

We all have a stubborn, rebellious side when it comes to our faith but at least we have faith. The sad truth is too many people have lukewarm faith these days or no faith at all. But the good news for us and for all humanity is that God has arranged for us to be baptized with the baptism of Jesus Christ, which John the Baptizer calls the baptism of ***the Holy Spirit and of fire***.

The baptism of the Holy Spirit is the baptism that blesses us for all the good we do in the name of God, in the Spirit of Christ. The baptism of fire is the baptism that burns away any bad in us, *if* we open ourselves to up it, *if* we let God work on those rough edges of ours. God works on our rough edges in many ways. There is personal and intercessory prayer – our prayers for ourselves and between us and God, and the prayers others say on our behalf. There is the guidance and correction of the community of faith – the church – which is charged with seeking the will of Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit in all matters.

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<sup>1</sup> Soelle, *To Work and to Love: A Theology of Creation* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 136.

<sup>2</sup> Tampa, Florida, 29 May 1994

There are also secular ways that we get burned, so to speak – worldly ways that we are shaped and reformed. Things like jail for criminals, the laws of the road, policies in the workplace or rules at school.

These and other worldly, secular constraints and punishments *can* all be used by God to shape us into better Christians, more faithful disciples of Christ, if we let them. Of course, though the world can also get out of hand and run contrary to God's will, and often does. And that's why the church is so important in society, in our families, in our lives, personally.

Without the church turning to Christ in helping us to establish and maintain our Christian walk – our spiritual journey – ***without encouragement and the correction*** of the church, *of the Holy Spirit*, ***we would be lost.***

Without the baptism of the Holy Spirit and of fire, we would be abandoned to the ways of the world, which too often we have been – as individuals, as a society, as humanity. Too often we ignore our baptism and embrace another path, an easier, more worldly path.

How has that been going for us? Overall, maybe not too well. If this country is not thriving as it could and should, I guarantee you that following Christ more closely could make a difference. If your family could be doing better, I guarantee you that following Christ more closely could make a difference. If this world is getting scarier and scarier, I guarantee you – come on, say it to together with me – *following Christ could make a difference.*

It is Christianity and other upstanding religions and even belief systems that we as the human race need to rely on, if we hope to have and enjoy a brighter future.

And yet the danger to the survival of Christianity couldn't be any greater than it is right now! Well, it could be worse, but let's pray it doesn't get any worse. Let's pray this trend of turning away from Christ and His church gets turned around, and then respond in Faith as God would lead us.

After all, turning ourselves around is what we're supposed to be doing. Christ's church is not expected to be perfect right out the gate – only Christ is perfect. Christianity and all organized religions have their failings.

AND that's why we have the baptism of the Holy Spirit and of fire. God gives us both these baptisms in order to encourage that which we do well and to burn away that which we do poorly, that which we do in opposition to God and how God would have us act and interact, how God would have us live and grow.

God wants us to be wheat, to be like the fruit of the land and to grow and thrive, to feed the world, to bring beauty to the earth. But God knows that we have taken on an outer shell of chaff – a useless hard shell that gets in the way of God's desire for us.

So God sent Jesus to be baptized right before our eyes, that we might be baptized right before his eyes, in his sight, in the sight of God. Can you imagine what that would be like?

Luke tells us. Luke says, “Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, ‘You are my Son, the Beloved; ***with you I am well pleased.***”

Did you catch that!?! “When all the people were baptized,” says Luke. “When all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying” – no doubt praying for all the people who were and ever will be baptized – when this happened, “... a voice came from heaven and said ... with you I am well pleased.”

When we live into our baptism of encouragement and correction, God turns to us and says, “With you, I am well pleased.” In Christ, we are pleasing to God. What more would we like to hear from God concerning us, you, concerning us?

And all it takes is for each of us – you and me and your family and friends and neighbors and coworkers and schoolmates – each of us to live into our baptism, to let the chaff be burned away and to allow the shining kernel of wheat to spring forth into the world. What are you going to be this week and in the days ahead, chaff or wheat? Amen.

#### **Pastoral Prayer**

Heavenly God, at the baptism of Jesus in the River Jordan, you proclaimed him your beloved Son, and anointed him with the Holy Spirit.

Grant that all who are baptized into his name may keep the covenant they have made, and boldly confess him as Lord and Savior, who with you and the Holy Spirit lives and reigns, One God, in glory everlasting.

Grant, O Lord, that we would be “delivered from evil” through the prayer we pray and the baptism we live.

Temptation and struggle are all around us, Lord, but in you we can overcome it all. In you, we receive our spiritual, physical, and emotional sustenance to carry us through each day.

So we pray for those in need this day, even for ourselves. You know our need, O Lord. Meet us where we are, and provide us what we need, that we might follow Christ more closely and enjoy the difference that makes in our lives and in our world.

For all is possible in your name, all is contained in your prayer, that prayer that you taught us, saying:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name;  
Thy kingdom come; Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.  
Give us this day our daily bread; And forgive us our debts as we  
forgive our debtors.  
And lead us not into temptation, But deliver us from evil,  
For Thine is the Kingdom and the Power and the Glory forever.  
Amen.**