

Light My Fire

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N.B. These sermons are made available with a request: that the reader appreciate that, ideally, a sermon is an oral/aural experience that takes place in the context of worship, supported and reinforced by readings, contemplative music, rousing hymns, silence, and prayer and that it is but one part of an extended conversation that occurs over time between a minister and a covenanted congregation.

A few weeks ago, I was having “candle problems.”

Here at First, there are chalices throughout the building and almost every meeting starts with a candle-lighting.

That’s just wonderful unless you don’t happen to have a match, or your match simply won’t light.

At one small group meeting I’d brought matches from home but no matchbox. I thought that it would be easy to simply strike the match against the base of the chalice.

With a confident flourish I struck away, but only succeeded in making garish red marks on the concrete base.

Meanwhile, the match in my hand stayed cool and unchanged.

At a committee meeting the next day I learned that others have the same problem.

An energetic discussion ensued about where to buy the handy barbeque wands that light candles automatically.

Nobody really knew what those “flamy-things” were called, and whether the ones found at the Dollar Store were truly reliable.

Perhaps the worst thing that could happen at the beginning of any Sunday service or committee meeting would be to have our chalice flame not light, because of a defective “flamy-thing.”

At that particular meeting, a suitable match was found.

We didn't need to rub two sticks together, that time.

But a few weeks later it was time to write my sermon, and I found myself strangely lacking for inspiration.

A few months ago I had named my sermon "Light My Fire," but now the passionate flame of insight I'd imagined was strangely absent.

The white page of my empty word doc stared out at me, like the pale wick of an unlit tea-light.

Perhaps it was no coincidence that the blank page came at the end of a long sequence of very busy days—a blazing streak of meetings, discussion groups, emails, worship services, and two out-of-town training sessions and retreats.

The rapid-fire pace had somehow led me, not to a fiery sermon, but instead, to a feeling of being "un-lit" . . . even a little "burned out."

Perhaps you know the feeling.

The comedian Steven Wright tells a simple, wonderful joke:

I remember when the candle shop burned down.

Everyone stood around singing 'Happy Birthday.'

It struck me—like a match, actually—that this little two-liner could be a commentary on church life in general.

What else is religious community, after all, but a kind of candle factory . . . a place where light and hope is rekindled with amazing reliability?

We may be surprised that such a fantastic candle shop could burn down!

And yet, we see it happen every week, as our bright individual candles melt down into a molten sandy soup.

“When the candle shop burned down, everyone stood around singing ‘Happy Birthday’.”

After any transformative experience...which inevitably involves pain and loss...we have no choice but to start from scratch.

The emptiness we experience in the un-lit times may prepare us for the fire yet to come.

§

We call this the “season of light”...but in many ways it’s also the time of deepening shadow.

Because of our global inter-connectedness, we are continually aware of oppression and suffering almost unimaginable in scope.

No amount of artificial light nor distraction can hide it from our hearts.

Yet, as Anne Frank once wrote, “a single candle can both defy and define the darkness.”

§

Recently I learned about a candle-lighting vigil called “Sisters in Spirit,” to raise awareness about the more than 580 aboriginal women and girls who have been murdered or gone missing in Canada.

In addition to the annual candle-lit observance, a virtual candle-lighting takes place continuously on the web.

In a sense, the virtual candles are not even there... they spring up only from digital information.

And yet as I lit one of those candles the other night, I found it a surprisingly powerful practice.

Today, one of the Amnesty International actions we're supporting is "No More Stolen Sisters: Justice for the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women of Canada."

Amnesty notes that the federal government has indefinitely delayed funding for "Sisters in Spirit"—and other initiatives that protect aboriginal women.

It calls us to "speak out loudly and clearly so that the government will finally listen."

To light our fires of indignation; to rise up from silence and loss.

Meanwhile, December 6th marked the anniversary of the Montreal Massacre, when fourteen female engineering students were gunned down at L'Ecole Polytechnique, simply because they were women.

Almost a quarter of a century later, we are still lighting candles and holding vigils for those fourteen women...

Along with countless other victims of violence that is motivated by prejudice and hate.

We are called to write letters, light candles, lift voices.

Over and over, we begin again with our "un-lit" flames—
with mourning and with absence...

Affirming that the experience of darkness or despair holds within it the potential to be transformed.

§

Every year at this time, Amnesty activists around the world write letters of solidarity directly to prisoners and people experiencing human rights violations.

Many of those prisoners are, in effect, candles on their own.

People who defy the darkness and in doing so, who call attention to themselves because they blaze so brightly.

In confronting evil and injustice, they also confront the possibility—even the likelihood—that their lives will be utterly changed and that they might die in the process.

How fitting that we think of them by lighting candles, which do signify hope and love but also remind us of the constant transformation of life, which always includes loss.

Indeed, Buddhist teacher Jack Kornfield points out that “fires of initiation” are in essence a confrontation with the unknown—the confrontation with death.

He writes, “the monasteries of Thailand where I trained as a Buddhist monk were purposely situated in areas known for wild animals, dark caves, and ghosts.

The training included sitting alone all night or meditating in forest charnel grounds, staying with the corpses that were being cremated until the fire went out at dawn.”

He writes that “the unknown territory of initiation will open before us only to the extent that we turn our whole being courageously toward it.”

When we allow ourselves to be vulnerable,
we open up our own potential to be lit up by life.

Knowing that, in order for a candle to be lit at all, something of the candle must be lost.

§

Wendell Berry writes, “Help me, please, to carry this candle against the wind.”

On the one hand, we know the candle doesn’t stand a chance.

On the other hand, we know how much difference one candle makes, as long as it does burn.

We encourage each other to rise against the wind,

knowing that every life is as fragile as it is powerful...

Knowing that our lives, like all lives, will burn away, ashes to ashes.

Yet throughout the course of our brief time on earth,
we sing Happy Birthday...Merry Christmas.

We celebrate transformation and new life.

§

Having come to a point of exhaustion and emptiness more than once, I have often wondered how new light could come.

But as a songwriter, I've often been amazed at how something new can arise out of the dust of this world.

I am inspired by other artists, like Alana McLeod, the artist of Cree and Scottish descent whose work we honour and enjoy in Sunderland Hall today.

I notice that when a new song—or any new spark of purpose—arises, it seems to do so in spite of me, rather than because of me.

When I admit that I am baffled, or lost, or broken...something else moves in.

You might call it love, or God, or spirit, or the inner light...it does not matter.

This creative regenerative force also fuels the countless acts of courage that take place, in the face of the world's suffering.

I cannot name or explain the source of that creative healing energy—but I know it rises up.

I wrote "Light a Candle" not when I was in a "good mood" and when everything was going well.

I wrote it when I was in a low point, and nothing else seemed to work.

The same was true for Carolyn McDade when she wrote “Spirit of Life.”

She came home one night from a long meeting for a social justice project, feeling exhausted and discouraged.

She sat down at the piano, to ask “Spirit of Life, come unto me.”

And come unto her—and then unto us—it did.

I’m not arguing to deliberately get burned out for the sake of enlightenment.

But I am hoping to create in myself a foundation of spiritual health that allows me to accommodate—even appreciate—the times of quiet, of depletion, even of sadness...

And then to take up the light that rises up for me
Even if it one small light...

Tend it as well as I can...
and pass it along to others.

I take heart from the words of Nelson Mandela, who said:

“The greatest glory in living lies not in never falling, but in rising every time we fall.”

“The greatest glory in living lies not in never falling, but in rising every time we fall.”

So, as we approach the time of solstice, the darkest time of the year...

When we are aware of the injustice that continues,
through the ages and despite our efforts...

When we feel burned down by life....
Awaiting for the advent of new purpose,

May we stop to wonder:

How may I be transformed, so that others may shine?
How might I meet the darkness, to light another's way?

May our fires be lit
By the love that surrounds us
Through Source and spirit...

Connecting us to each other,
and to every living thing.