

*Church of the Beatitudes  
United Church of Christ*

*555 W. Glendale Ave.*

*Phoenix, AZ 85021*

*602-264-1221*

[info@beatitudeschurch.org](mailto:info@beatitudeschurch.org)

[www.beatitudeschurch.org](http://www.beatitudeschurch.org)

“Never place a period  
where God has placed a comma”

| Gracie Allen |

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God is still speaking,

**UNITED CHURCH  
OF CHRIST**



**SERMON**

**“Playing with Fire”**

**Rev. Dr. Nancy Nelson Elsenheimer**

**May 11, 2008**

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**Scripture: Acts 2:1-21**

We have already experienced a Pentecost, a stirring of the Spirit in the midst of the community. With our children’s choir singing and the Marshallese singing and a baptism within an extended family, the Spirit is surely in our midst. To the community that first Pentecost, Peter spoke briefly. So will I.

Read any box of matches: “Keep out of reach of children.” Read the instructions on any chemistry kit: “Adult supervision is required for safe operation.” From an early age, we all are taught, “Don’t play with fire.” My father, a Boy Scout leader, taught me a ‘healthy respect’ for fire. As I looked forward to the baptism, here is a quotation I ran across, “A child is not a vase to be filled but a fire to be lit”<sup>1</sup>

Fire is elemental and basic. It is passion and life. It is energy, both positive and harmful. A burning fire is romantic and cozy, and a burning fire consumes a house, a neighborhood, a forest, leaving only embers, ashes, and loss. Fire is a controlled burn and it is spontaneous combustion.

Pentecost is the epitome of fire and passion. It is another Jewish celebration. Fifty days after the Passover, and as many as half a million Jews have made a pilgrimage to Jerusalem.<sup>2</sup> They may have come for Passover and stayed on or they may have come for this Festival of the Spring Harvest. They have filled the streets and hillsides. They are staying with families and friends. They are the Diaspora, the dispersed, who have come home. It is still King Herod’s reign, and there is still tension in the air. Who had not heard the stories about the Jew crucified, about the empty tomb, even heard the stories about seeing him again? Who had not heard that his disciples, his followers, were still meeting, still believing, still hanging on to the hope that their experiences were not in vain?

That is where the combustion begins. Rumors about cyclone winds. Rumors about tongues of fire. Rumors about languages. Rumors about drunkenness. Rumors in churches? They have not even started the church yet and already there are rumors! The teller of the story tells us that what happens to the crowd is ‘bewilderment’. They were ‘bewildered’. This writer Luke is the only New Testament author who uses this word, ‘bewildered’, and it is actually two words in Greek which mean, “pour together.” When two substances are poured together, it can be a gentle mixture, or, ask any chemist, it can be highly combustible. Here, the meaning is combustible. It is a religious festival, celebrating the giving of the Torah, the law, to the people of God. They had been slaves, now they were free. Once they were no people, now they were God’s people. They were slaves again under this King Herod, and could it be true this time? This Christ? This Messiah? Wasn’t he dead? Wasn’t he buried? Could hope really be alive?

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<sup>1</sup> [http://thinkexist.com/quotation/a\\_child\\_is\\_not\\_a\\_vase\\_to\\_filled\\_but\\_a\\_fire\\_to\\_be/180473.html](http://thinkexist.com/quotation/a_child_is_not_a_vase_to_filled_but_a_fire_to_be/180473.html)

<sup>2</sup> Karen Armstrong, *Jerusalem.: One City, Three Faiths*, p. 136

The past and the present are poured together. The hope and the fear are poured together. The aloneness and the crowdedness are poured together. The fire re-kindles their passion and their compassion. A new community is born. At the end of the story a new way of living is born where they hold everything in common, sell all their possessions and give to anyone who has need. If that is what church is about, how do we measure up? They began 'to be called out', an ecclesia, the word from which we get our word 'church'. From pouring together, the combustion births devotion, teaching, fellowship and prayer. There was awe and wonders, miraculous signs wherever they went. They no longer 'played with fire'. They 'became' the fire.

Taped to my desk, when I pull out a leaf, are snippets of paper. In this very high tech filing system of mine, if I come across a reading, a saying, a quote that I like, I cut it out and tape it to my desk. On my right hand drawer side is one I have attributed to Ann Weems, a theologian and a poet. These are her words about Pentecost and the experience of the community of faith being called out to follow one called the Christ:

“Christ’s name is not Aloneness.

It is Community.

Christ’s name is not Ordinarity.

It is Life—Abundant, plentiful, multi-flavored Life.

Christ’s name is Risk.

Christ’s name is Giving.

Christ’s name is Health.

Christ’s name is Accepting.

Christ’s name is Tear-the-Walls-Down.

Christ’s name is Out-in-the-Marketplace.

Christ’s name is Walk-the-Streets-and Find-my-Hurting-People.

Christ’s name is Feed-my-Sheep.

Christ’s name is Changed Lives.

Christ’s name is New Creation.

Christ’s name is Love them.

Christ’s name is Love.

Where one or two are gathered together in Love, there Christ is also.

The strong wind blows and it fills the whole house—Christ’s church-and nothing is ordinary anymore.”<sup>3</sup>

Let us be the people of this Christ, poured together, a people of fire. Amen

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<sup>3</sup> Ann Weems