

The Holy Spirit and Fire

What was/were the biggest change or changes of your life? You see, you may have had more than one. If you've only had one, don't feel bad. Think for a moment. Now, as you feel comfortable, turn and share with someone nearby for two minutes. Is anyone feeling brave enough to share with the congregation this morning?

My own life went through a few changes. I changed when my parents passed away and lost that anchor relatively early in my life. I tried to change careers but always kept coming back to teaching in one form or another. As a minister, I know that I am still teaching every Sunday or every time I am asked to speak. I've shared that I come from a long line of teachers on my father's side of the family. Teaching is truly in my blood.

Perhaps the biggest change for me was to no longer be a member of a Catholic church. When I made the decision to follow my heart and marry Mark, I was told that I had technically "excommunicated" myself from the Catholic church. I had already found a new spiritual home at Wilbraham United Church where I would be welcomed for who I was

and where I was on life's journey. It is also where I believe that I could finally be receptive to the call of the Holy Spirit.

I know that I struggled to answer some sort of "calling." I truly believe that I was called to teach when and where I did, even if it took some time to figure that out. The congregation of Wilbraham United Church had some other plans as, on the rare occasion that I would preach, the members would tell me that I was in the wrong profession and should be preaching every week. I didn't disagree but the thought of becoming a minister in the United Church of Christ or any Congregational church was a bit daunting.

I had been baptized, though, and really started to feel the pull and call of the Holy Spirit. It was as if a fire had been lit and I was literally moved to pursue this. I've said it before and I will say it again, my ordination in the United Church of Christ/Congregational is still the biggest surprise of my life.

Almost all of us here have also been baptized. I know there may be a few who are considering it and are stuck on making that sort of commitment. We're here for you and we will rejoice with you when you

choose to be baptized. For the rest of us, I would venture to say that most were baptized as infants. You do realize that our baptism was not the same as how John the Baptist was baptizing. Let's consider what baptism meant then.

In Jesus' day, the practice of baptism had many meanings in Jewish culture. Its roots were in the daily washings performed before eating or praying. Cleansing the body was a way to prepare for a family gathering or divine worship. John (and other baptizers) used it as a means to symbolize transformation and readiness to turn away from a life of sin. Jesus comes to John and insists that John baptize him. It signifies the start of Jesus' public ministry as he promises a baptism of the Holy Spirit and fire.

Minutes ago, we renewed the baptismal promise made for us by our parents and quite possibly our godparents. We said that we wanted to renew and affirm the promises made at our baptism. We said that we recognized the call of God to always be God's people. We promised to embrace the way of Jesus in faith and ministry. We also said that we accept the nurture of the Holy Spirit who renews our spirit each day as

we accept and embrace others who seek a liberating faith in God. That faith is liberating as it frees us to do the good work of spreading the Gospel message to the best of our abilities.

Together we prayed, “O God, we rejoice in your grace, given and received. We thank you that you claim us, that you wash us, strengthen us, and guide us, that you empower us to live a life worthy of our calling. In the way of Jesus, make us as water in a dry and thirsty world. Establish us to be places of refreshment. Root us and nurture us in love, that with all your people, that we may rightly and justly serve you. Fill us with your fullness that our lives may overflow in service and love.”

We are smart enough to know that we cannot do this on our own. We need to accept and embrace the Holy Spirit to light a fire underneath us to continue to do this work. What sort of calling of the Holy Spirit can we respond to this year? It is so easy to want to sit at home, stay out of the cold, and wait for it to warm up a bit before we venture out. Trust me, I know how easy it can be to be in a robe and slippers. Some of us cannot come out and that is ok. We ask that you pray for us and pray

that the Holy Spirit lights fires under us. Those who can move about, though, may be called to move out into the fray to the best of our abilities.

What change or changes will come our way in 2025? It is, after all, the last year of the first quarter of the twenty-first century. Let the Holy Spirit renew our own baptismal vows to be disciples of Christ and understand what it means to be baptized in fire and the Holy Spirit. We pray that God fills us with the Holy Spirit and fire to do the work necessary to prepare our church, our congregation, and the people of the greater Westfield/Southwick area to continue to spread the Good News of Christ. May the Creator, Son, and Holy Spirit continue the good work in all of us as we are so moved this day. I pray that we all remain open to the Holy Spirit and not extinguish the fire.