

“Volatile”
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St. Luke’s Episcopal Church – Anchorage, Kentucky
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Acts 2:1-21; John 7:37-39

School ended for our kids on Thursday, and all week Ben has eagerly anticipated burning his homework and tests and projects, several inches worth, as a healing catharsis for the anxious hours and late nights. So he asked me about accelerants, specifically lighter fluid. He wants that pyre of papers to burn fiercely, but didn’t understand how lighter fluid actually burns, because it’s counterintuitive, how some liquids catch fire, while others like water extinguish it.

I explained that lighter fluid is highly volatile. Even at room temperature, it evaporates quickly, creating combustible gases. So the fluid doesn’t burn, it’s the gases it gives off, and the fire acts as a catalyst to the process, heating the lighter fluid, which causes it to release gas molecules even faster.

Of course, you make water can burn, too, through a process called electrolysis. Pass an electrical current through water, which is always a good idea. Separate the oxygen and hydrogen, and then very carefully apply a lit match.

By now, you’re probably wondering if you took a wrong turn this morning and wound up in a chemistry class instead of a worship service, but bear with me, because Pentecost is all about fire and fluid, and in this case the fluid in question is the water of baptism.

We just heard once again a story we already know well, about how on the tenth day after Jesus ascended into heaven, the disciples, gathered together in one place, shared an astonishing experience. First, a violent wind filled the entire house, and then, tongues, as of fire, appeared and rested on them. It must have been terrifying. Yet very much like the burning bush in the

wilderness that summoned Moses to God's presence, this fire did not consume. Not a single hair was singed, not a burn suffered, but how?

The simple answer is that this supernatural fire of the Spirit didn't need the ordinary, natural processes of combustion. It didn't need lighter fluid or any other fuel to burn. Instead, it sustained the flame dancing on the disciples' heads with its own inexhaustible energy, and that answer is true and sufficient. However, even greater insights emerge when we remember that baptism comes in two parts, water and fire.

The disciples received their baptism by water early on in Jesus' ministry. Just as now, so back then, it stood as a sacrament of initiation into the life of Christ and his Body, the Church, but as powerful and as meaningful as baptism by water is, its completion comes only through baptism by the Spirit.

During Jesus' life and ministry, even after his resurrection from the dead, the disciples had not yet received this second part of baptism, which Jesus makes clear in a very brief comment preserved in John's gospel. "Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink. As the scripture has said, 'Out of the believer's heart shall flow rivers of living water.'" Now he said this about the Spirit, which believers in him were to receive; for as yet there was no Spirit, because Jesus was not yet glorified."

Now let's tease out what this means. Jesus was not yet glorified because his glory would come only through crucifixion and resurrection. That's when his identity as Messiah and Son of God would be fully revealed, but at this point in John's story those two events lay in the future. After the cross and the empty grave, the Spirit, at some point, would come to complete the cycle of baptism, to unite the two primal elements of water and fire to serve as guardian and guide and

to give the followers of Jesus power to continue and to expand the mission of proclaiming the good news.

But there's something more that's always intrigued me, and that's how Jesus speaks of living water. To me, that's peculiar. Water gives life. No creature can survive long without it. In fact, liquid water is the first thing astronomers look for as they seek out the possibility of life on other planets. But we don't really regard this life-giving substance as alive itself, so what does Jesus mean when he speaks of living water?

The living water of Jesus refers to a substance that goes far beyond what's necessary for mere physical survival, something with a supernatural aspect ready to combust when the Spirit reaches it. Living waters is a thinly veiled allusion to baptism, and those waters are alive because they are highly volatile. The waters respond to the Spirit's presence and intentionally cooperate with it to kindle a fire by giving up some of itself. And that's truly alive.

Now this concept may not settle well with some people. When we think of volatility, we think of danger. A volatile person, for instance, has trouble with self-control, lashing out reactively, unleashing their anger at the slightest provocation, or sometimes without any provocation at all. Volatility in the stock market makes us nervous, because it introduces greater uncertainty about what will happen to the savings we've invested for retirement or for a child's college education. So when we begin to think of baptismal waters as volatile, there's more than a hint of risk there, a slight touch of menace even. We're not sure how we feel about the idea that when the Spirit comes around we'll burst into flames or potentially explode.

Some feel that all this Holy Spirit stuff belongs to the evangelicals and charismatics, with their babbling and dancing and fainting, and they can have it. It violates our treasured sense of order and dignity, but this is a misperception, because the Spirit can express itself in less

exuberant ways in the form of solemn reverence and silent contemplation. Yet it wouldn't be the end of the world, if occasionally a little spark of spontaneity burst forth in our midst.

Even if we accept this, we still try to avoid the Spirit by shunting aside the water of baptism. We bottle it up, because a volatile liquid in a sealed bottle doesn't have enough room to breathe, enough room to evaporate into a vapor that can combust. We put that bottle somewhere safe, far from any potential source of ignition. Sometimes, we hide it so well we forget where we put it. And we often do this because we know intuitively that the waters of baptisms, if ignited by the Spirit, could very well lead us to new adventures that might cause us to endure exposure, accusation, criticism, and ostracism. Those volatile, flaming waters of baptism will take us into a whole new world of weird, when we'd prefer to stay normal.

The disciples, for instance, suddenly received power to speak in foreign languages so that all who gathered to hear them, from every nation on the known Earth, could understand the message about Jesus. This amazing feat convinced many that what the disciples said was true, and later on in The Acts of the Apostles, people were baptized by water and the Spirit by the thousands, but with human nature being what it is – skeptical, cynical – many in that crowd saw this miracle as a freak show, probably faked. One person accused them of being drunk, even though it was only 9:00 in the morning. Though this isn't included in scripture, we can easily imagine Peter objecting, “Hey, we're not Episcopalians!”

If you keep reading past the second chapter of Acts, you'll see how life gets more exciting and rougher and rougher for the disciples with each passing page. People feared the Spirit's flame, how it threatened to consume and transform the *status quo* into something new and unfamiliar. For sharing their faith, the disciples would suffer ridicule, exile, and eventually

martyrdom. But nothing stopped them. Nothing could, except their own fear, because when you unite water and the Spirit, the two together become one unstoppable force.

As tough as it got, as strange as it might have felt, those disciples stayed on fire, and it lit up the world. The living water poured forth from them to people thirsty for hope, justice, mercy, and peace. It's almost as if they couldn't help themselves. Having chosen to follow Jesus, having made that commitment to wait for the Spirit and receive it, they were propelled into the world full of joy – a joy that far surpassed whatever trouble the Spirit's flame might have brought them along the way.

Each year at Pentecost, the birthday of the Church, we gather because of them, because of their “Yes!” to God. Had they said, “No,” instead, we wouldn't be here. And it's not just us but billions of people, over the course two millennia, have followed and still follow the cross to freedom from death. We gather because God calls us to serve as bearers of the flame, to be the fire that stands bright for billions more descendants in the faith, for millennia to come or when Jesus returns, whichever happens first. And we won't get burned, at least not by God. Whatever challenges or obstacles we face, we will rise above, through God's grace, as Jesus rose from the empty tomb.

We will find ways to speak the Gospel to generations yet unborn with words that resonate in their hearts and set them on fire. We will witness to Christ's love in countless ways that reveal, better than words alone possibly could, a radical new reality where everyone is welcome, no matter what, to receive the blazing combination of water and Spirit, the baptism into the Body and Blood. We will set aside our fear, our regret, and break the seal of those bottles and give them air, the rushing wind of the Spirit, so that the waters of baptism can become volatile and alive through us. Amen.