

Sunday – February 13, 2011
Pastor - Bob Dixon
Sermon - **Fire Guard** (Scout Sunday)

St. Matthias UMC
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I will start my message this morning from Paul's 2nd Letter to Timothy, Chapter 1: 3-14. *Listen for the word of God, spoken for you now:*

READ FROM BIBLE

One of the most significant things I have learned over my past 35 years as a Boy Scout has been the mastery of the fire pit. Many people take the ability to make a fire for granted, and because it is so readily available in our modern lives few have ever fully appreciated its importance and value to humanity. For the historians in the crowd, the first evidence of human use of fire as a tool can presently be traced back 400,000 years in the form of charred fossil remains from some pre-historic dinner in modern day northern China. Ever since then and most likely long before that, we have used fire to change our environment and transform our way of life.

One of the greatest things I enjoy about being a Scout Leader is passing on the knowledge of how to master this essential tool of the wilderness. To begin with I always start by telling new scouts about how critical it is to prepare for the fire before lighting. This is needed because our inborn love for fire tempts everyone to just want to start lighting matches. There is something about fire, smoke and the great outdoors – we call fire the fire Boy Scout TV in the wild, because of its captivating powers.

There are some basic safety rules, such as clearing away 10 ft. around the fire pit, using something like rocks to build a border, having water ready to douse a runaway flame, and most importantly taking a few minutes to properly gather up sufficient amounts of wood.

There are 3 essential elements to fire. You must have oxygen, you must have fuel in the form of wood or other combustible, and you must have a source of ignition that presents heat. Now to build a fire you just can't go and grab a bunch of sticks. One must be very deliberate in the selection and grading of the wood.

You start off with tinder, pieces of dry wood, typically smaller in diameter than your finger. Next, you must have kindling, about the diameter of your thumb, and lastly you must have fuel, which is about the size of your wrist. I like to have something ready in the form of a fire starter, such as dryer lint or waxed newspaper. Of course you need a few matches, or flint and steel or even one of those bow drills to provide that first little spark.

New scouts typically build what I call a junk fire. They just throw a bunch of multi-sized sticks together and toss away their matches in vain as they try to get it to light. Some times it will, but only for a brief moment and then it fades away. After a few ill attempts, I methodically show them that a proper fire starts before the match is struck. It requires discipline and patience in building it. Starting with a solid base and arranging it as such so that it grows up and out, and gives off great light and heat.

My favorite fire epitomizes this in the shape of a log cabin, which is most often used in scouting for campfires around the lake as well as an excellent means to scare away a raccoon or cook up a tasty fish. The log cabin gives off great light and heat in its beginning, and then diminishes into a wonderful bed of burning coals upon which to cook or rest beside. It is like an old friend who the next day has reduced itself to ashes; giving up its complete self but in the transformation by fire bringing forth great light, glory and service.

Sometimes when the scouts are learning how to build fires, it is best to just let it fade, re-lay your fire correctly and try again.

Fire by the way is mentioned over 37 times in the Bible. Fire is very important to many religions. For the Israelites and patriarchs of the Old Testament – God always appeared in the form of smoke and fire –remember the story in Exodus of Moses and the burning bush? It was bright, hot and hard to miss. God’s presence was made known in the tabernacle of the Old Testament by a pillar of smoke, light and vapors over the Ark of the Covenant. Fire in the Old Testament was both a tool of God’s judgment and wrath, such as the raining down of fire on Sodom and Gomorrah in judgment on those who turned away from God. At the same time, fire was also the means by which the faithful, as we heard in the OT passage from Leviticus, liberated their sacrifices from their earthly form as flesh to a spiritual form of vapors and scents to please and honor the God of Israel.

From the New Testament most notably is the story of Pentecost, where the Holy Spirit of God descended on the faithful after Jesus' resurrection and ascension as tongues of fire. In the passage from Timothy, we heard the story of Paul's admonition to a young man who was timid and afraid to share the Gospel to rekindle his faith as one would rekindle a fire that while smoldering contained enough of a little spark to grow back into a great flame.

Well – right now someone is saying what does this all have to do with church – I hate camping and will never use this stuff. Well our spiritual lives and relationship with God are very much like my lesson on how to build a campfire.

Just like the campfire we need some essential elements to realize our full spiritual potential. To guard our spiritual fire, initially there must be preparation. The fire pit is prepared by the fire guard. The fire guard creates a clean sanctuary where the fire may be sound and grow unencumbered but yet also not become uncontrolled. In the passage from Leviticus, the temple priests were charged with daily cleaning of the altar of sacrifice to keep it pure and uncluttered. They shed their dirty clothes from the spreading of ashes and put on clean linen to serve God in the Temple.

We pledge to provide this sanctuary each time we conduct a baptism. For young children, being brought up in the faith, parents, grandparents and others provide a safe and nurturing environment for children to learn to know God and live in community. Paul in his letter to Timothy mentions Lois and Eunice who undoubtedly prepared young Timothy's heart to be a place of grace to receive faith.

Likewise in preparation of the fire site, a suitable border is put into place to both protect the fire from being trod upon, as well as to keep it within boundaries, but all the while afford it to transfer its light and heat. Concerned adults and nurturers likewise need to place boundaries on our children to keep them safe, but at the same time allow them space to grow and learn to share their light and service as they grow in the spirit.

As adults, we prepare ourselves for our relationship with God by clearing out our own fire pit known as our thoughts and hearts. We can't grow spiritually until we have cleaned out our own heart of such hazards as greed, lust, hate, anger, and malice towards our neighbors. We have to build our own limits by learning to recognize those things that lead us astray in sin so

as to be disciplined to avoid them, but at the same time allow us to be lights to the world and to share God's love in community.

Secondly, we need to take time to gather up the right elements for our spiritual fire. Many people, just like a novice Scout will simply grab a bunch of spiritual sticks, such as spiritual sound-bites, modern day new age principles, and the latest Bible Ipad applications, throw them in a pile, and aimlessly drop "spiritual" matches upon them by attending church a few times a year in hopes to grow a great flame. Yes you might get a little fire going, but it will never stand up to the winds that blow from the world around us, with its ups, downs and assaults on our beliefs. These little fires will never truly grow into their full potential, because we simply haven't taken the time to build up a good stock of spiritual beliefs and principles from which to sustain our flame once it is lit.

What do I need to gather up for a spiritual fire? How about a little fire starter? This one is easy; you don't even need to look. God offers us the opportunity to accept his grace at all times. Even when we have sunk to the lowest lows mentally, physically or spiritually, we always carry this little permanent reserve of fire-starter that can be dusted off and re-used. The scriptures tell us that nothing, nothing of this world can separate us from the love of Christ and as such we only need to open up our hearts again to receive this blessing.

You will also need that spiritual tinder. Those little twigs that get that light quickly and start to build up that heat. For our children spiritual tinder may be bringing them to vacation bible school in the summer, participating in Sunday school, or teaching them to pray before each meal. For adults spiritual tinder may be starting a daily devotional reading, cracking open our Bible a few times a day to hear the good news, tuning in to that religious radio program on the way to work, or taking time to give earnest thanks and praise to God each morning and night when we open and close our eyes. These little things, serve just to get things going a little, but if you only build your fire with spiritual tinder, it will never grow to be very useful or stand up to the wind.

You will also need that spiritual kindling. This is what really gets things going upward. Spiritual kindling is a little more substantial, you start to get some meaningful heat from the kindling and it gives off some light. Kindling in our spiritual lives is answering God's grace in fellowship within

a community of believers. Yes - we can still experience God in solitude, but not to the fullest extent. God's grace isn't evident if we keep it limited to tinder. Each piece of kindling needs another to stand beside to receive its full potential. Our spiritual kindling is coming together in worship and service. Our spiritual kindling is deciding to participate in a Bible Study to hear what the scriptures say to others. Our spiritual kindling is taking an evening off to serve at the homeless shelter with others. For our children spiritual kindling is teaching them and allowing them to learn the importance of loving God and loving others through simple mission projects or sharing. The kindling within our spiritual fire takes that inherent little spark and lets it begin to shine. We are spiritual "kindling" when we gather around the altar in fellowship and share God's promise through the sacrament of communion.

Thirdly, we need that spiritual fuel. This is the big stuff. It is that which sustains the fire through the coldest and darkest of nights. It is that which gives hope, heat and light to its surroundings. This spiritual fuel is straight from the word of God as recorded in the scriptures. It is taking every word, wrestling with it, internalizing it, and letting the written word transform our physical, mental and moral elements, just as the fire transforms a piece of wood. This fuel allows the spiritual flame to purify and preserve. We don't have to worry about our spiritual fire going out with fuel, because it begins to burn so hot as to become almost unquenchable. The spiritual fuel takes our earthly physical existence and uses it in every way for God's kingdom. The spiritual fuel takes the word, letting it dominate our entire being, and in the end of this physical existence, leaves us as a pile of ashes, that has given off its full potential to transform the world around it by its light and heat.

I ask you to take advice from the words of Paul to young Timothy. Answer the call to guard your spiritual fire in both discipline and faith. Take time to prepare properly and gather the materials in advance. Don't be afraid to make mistakes with God, because we are always given the chance to start over again, we just need to ask. Build your spiritual fire on a solid foundation. Don't hide your light, rather burn in service to God as you bear light, heat and hope to the world around you. Guard the good deposit that was entrusted to you; guard it with the help of the Holy Spirit who lives in us.

Amen.