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UU Church of Ellsworth
“Not Water But Fire”

Water is the lifeblood of earth; it is well over half of the human body; water is the power to carve pillars from mountains and valleys from plains; it is the power to give life and to take it away. It floats in itself, it quenches thirst and fire. The people of the first century knew all that. and yet...and yet when they told the story of John the Baptist, John who came before Jesus, they told a story of one who said “I baptize with water, but one who comes after me, one whose sandals I am not worthy to tie, will baptize with the holy spirit and with fire.”

It’s a terrifying image. If we look back in the Bible it’s not impossible: the burning bush which spoke to Moses, the hot coal which called Isaiah to prophesy by touching his lips, the fires which consumed Sodom and Gomorrah when they were found to be unredeemable by a very angry God—but the fire images of the Hebrew Scriptures are wild. They inspire fear, and obedience through fear; they test loyalty and demand faith.

The one who comes after me will baptize with fire.

We can imagine the possibilities, Jesus and John standing side by side at the river, John in it up to his waist, Jesus standing beside a kind of funeral pyre on the banks. *Choose*, they might say, *choose your baptism*. In the already-scorched desert, fire would have been a way to cook food, but not essential for life. *Choose*, they might suggest, and the newly-convinced person looks between them, incredulous. Choose fire? You’ve got to be kidding.

There’s a level of power in fire that’s not just tempting, but incredibly dangerous. We know that, and yet we are inexorably drawn to it. Pushed by danger, pulled by power, why would we want to mess with fire, when we could have water which soothes, water which comforts, water which heals?

Perhaps because too much soothing and healing can be smothering. Perhaps because we know that we’re flawed, that soothing and healing aren’t the only things we need, that sometimes we need inspiration and courage, sometimes we need intensity and possibility, sometimes we need things that water cannot give us. Sometimes, sometimes we need fire.

Now water is not always friendly, either. Sticking with the Bible for the moment, we have of course the flood story, mirrored in scriptures and stories the world over. We have the red sea parting—and then closing again over the armies of the Pharaoh. We have storms and plagues and all of it comes from the sky, and none of it is very nice. Water can be used for purification. But as the spiritual says, “God gave Noah the rainbow sign—no more water but fire next time”. So what fire is there that can purify? We aren’t gifted with Moses burning bush, that burned although it was not consumed. We aren’t gifted with a god who stays the hand of fathers before they sacrifice their sons. We aren’t gifted with a god who fixes every problem, who intercedes in every moment, who keeps us from our own foolish self-destruction. If we were, if there were such a god, we would not be in such a mess. God or no god, we as a human people are responsible for our own daily goings-on, right, wrong or just plain confused. Sometimes that works out okay. Sometimes it doesn’t. Sometimes we have World AIDS Day and sometimes we have Columbine. Sometimes we tear down the Berlin Wall and sometimes we make war in a misguided quest for justice. There’s no one day when we’re all going to wake up and be perfect and infallible and every decision will be filled with compassion and good sense. It isn’t gonna happen, because we, in the end, are human.

For all the glories and mysteries of this great gift, as Marjorie Montgomery puts it, humanity carries some inherent liabilities. We are not always able to see clearly. We are not always able to judge. In fact, we know we're generally better off *not* judging, but we forget. That's human, too.

And in our forgetfulness, in our murky, unclear, judgmental moments, we make some bad decisions. We get lucky enough to satisfy mathematical statistics, but just barely. The rest of the time, when we're having an off day, we do off things. We speak harsh words, we hurt feelings, we allow ourselves to be hurt; we make errors in planning, we forget birthdays, we lash out. I wish we didn't. We wish we didn't. But we do.

And when we realize our mistake, the vast majority of us cringe. We shrink back from even the passing awareness that we have done something wrong. If we get past that denial we go into anger, and bargaining, and depression, and if we are very very lucky, acceptance. These are the classic five stages of grief, identified by Elizabeth Kubler Ross as the stages a dying patient goes through when they find out that they are dying. Over time the stages have been used more generally in other grief contexts, with varying success. They are not always suited to other experiences, and they are less linear than the word "stage" suggests, but they are often present, and the model is useful. When we are forced by our own actions to confront the distance between our personal reality and our ideals it *is* a loss, and we enter into this grieving with all of the liabilities that grief brings. We are confronting our own spiritual mortality—the fact that we have acted out of alignment with our own set of values can be devastating.

We're human. And we're so far from perfect that we take a chance of making a mistake every single time we pick up a pen; every time we speak; every time we walk out our front doors. We want to lead, but we cannot be beyond reproach. No one is perfect. No one.

And without perfection, it is strikingly difficult to hold the moral high ground.

Difficult--

but not impossible.

Because with imperfection, with uncertainty, with the shiftiness of reality, comes access to the other side. If we can err, then we can change.

We can learn about our mistakes

we can learn from our mistakes

and we can let that learning sink into our pores and sing in our veins and we can let it urge us to grow. Because when we err, when we get so far off track that no one wants to believe we wandered there ourselves, when we make a mistake and that mistake has consequences, we can open ourselves to the experience and we can welcome it. We can welcome new knowing and the strength and power that it brings. We can welcome new wisdom, and the potential it carries. We can step into the one cleansing fire that does more than destroy.

Destruction is not the answer.

In a sense, we die and must be rebuilt—reborn—in order to continue to live happily. If we do not undergo this transformation we are likely to feel the pull of depression as we lose sight of both the part of ourselves that we have rejected and the person we had wanted to be.

And thus, a craving is born. From nearly the beginning of recorded time, people have sought ways to be relieved of guilt, released from misdeeds, cleansed by society, absolved of mistakes. We want something more than moving on, something that carries implications of forgiveness or a fresh start. When we know we have been wrong, we tend to want some way to make it right. But how can we do that? How can anyone really make things right again? A basic fact of life is that we can do things again, but an action, once committed, is done. Those particular minutes

will never return to the cosmic time bank—we have used them in the only way we will ever use them, and the repercussions of that use will now ripple out into the world. Apologies may help, if the wronged party is human, but they don't change what happened. Fines and punishments may look like they balance the scales of justice, but they just introduce increased strife and anger if they happen alone. Restorative justice comes closer—it brings the victim and the offender into conversation, and it generally acknowledges the community impact of the offense. Still, something is missing. These are all parts of the elephant in the story of the five blind men—one feels a rope, one a fan, one a tree, one a hose, and one a spear, but none understand the underlying truth.

The unnamed center of human responses to injury is powerful and as difficult as it is simple. What we all seem to want is transformation. If there is an injured party they want relief from their injury, but they also want to know, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that the misdeed will never happen again to anyone.

Our societies have had a variety of ways of ensuring that. Under Hammurabi's Code, one of the first written legal codes in human history, the Babylonians followed the "eye for an eye" principle. There are shades of legal reasoning now as there were then, and some errors are considered more grievous than others, but whether the transgression ever appears in a court of law, the real power still lies in the hands of the offender.

Sometimes we are wrongly accused. There's no question of that. Fallibility swings both ways. But when we are wrong, when we know we are wrong, when we know we have caused injury and pain and when we know we are at fault, since we still hold the cards, what can we do? We can seek a baptism of fire.

I know it sounds crazy. It sounds like Sita's ritual purity test in the Hindu story of Ram and Sita, where he suspects her of infidelity and she has to prove her faith by standing in the flames. It sounds like the story of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego who were "thrown...into a blazing furnace" in the book of Daniel. It sounds like a fool's quest for an impossible absolution. But it is not.

It is indeed a quest for absolution, for it is absolution that we seek, absolution flanked by repentance. But there is nothing impossible about it, and fools won't make the journey. When we have done something wrong and we are truly sorry, we want to make amends. We want to make up for it. And then we want—no, we *need* to be able to kilt up our skirts and run with it, run with the sparkling new awareness and fervent desire to do better. If we cannot use our atonement to move forward, we have made no progress at all.

It is selfish to do wrong when we know better, for we pull energy and time and attention to ourselves when we may not need it, when even if we need it there are better ways to get it, when we could just ask for the help and support of our community and move forward with grace, but we make mistakes and when we do, when we have claimed the community resources that go toward handling a wrongdoing, we owe it to the community and to ourselves to make the best possible use of those resources, to embrace the possibilities and the opportunities and to make of them a better self and a better world.

[We must plunge inward and rise up, refreshed, as we consider the gifts of the spirit within us, as we accept the challenge of renewed life, as we offer up our hearts for the work to which our faith calls us. That work is transformative work: it is the work of change.

That work is holy work: it is the work of belief made real.

That work is justice and hope and love and it is *risky*, people! It means the kind of cultural shift we haven't seen for a long time. It calls for strength—the strength of community. It calls for

wisdom—the wisdom of our elders; the wisdom of our children. It calls for brilliance and inspiration and flexibility and humility and it calls for the salvific fire of growth.

If we are going to face something as strong as habit;

if we are going to face something as harsh as shame;

if we are going to turn our experience around and rejoice in the power of a new world—a world that resists war, a world that embraces communication; a world that welcomes and fosters diversity—then we are going to have to change, and we’re going to have to change a lot.

And that change will start

not with an angry god

not with a lonely and marginalized prophet

not with a corporation or a government;

that change will start right here

with us.]

So what is this baptism of fire we seek? What is this fire that burned so hot that John was not even worthy to tie its sandals?

What is this fire with which Jesus supposedly worked? What is so powerful it overcomes even the gravest wrongs and most abject injustices? What can truly redeem us?

It is not the destroying fire of Sodom and Gomorrah. It is not the “lake of fire” from Revelations. This is not about bombing the villages of our hearts to cinders. This is about another kind of occupation; another kind of flame. This is about the all-consuming fire of passion, which transforms us and our relationship to the world.

If we have wronged, if we have erred, if we have caused injury or pain or destruction, the answer is not more destruction. The answer is not more pain. The answer is not more injury or death or a warrior’s righteous anger. The answer,

which we all hold in our hands,

is the abject transformation of ourselves.

It is for us to lay ourselves at the feet of the destruction which we have created, to weep and gnash our teeth at the violence we have caused to know all the possibilities, to fear the possibilities, to embrace the possibilities,

and then to bend ourselves

to bend toward hope, for hope is what we crave;

to bend toward joy, for joy is what we need,

to bend toward justice;

to bend toward love.

It is the fire of passion that transforms us,

the fire of possibility made manifest by our hands

by our hearts

by our own spirits

living

and alive

in this awesome world.

Blessed be

and amen.