

FAN THE FLAME

2 TIMOTHY 1:1-14

LETHBRIDGE MENNONITE CHURCH

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OCTOBER 2, 2016/20TH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

WORLD COMMUNION SUNDAY

In our passage this morning, Paul tells Timothy to “fan into flame the gift of God which is in you.”

This morning, on World Communion Sunday, I thought I would simply see how these words of Paul’s have made their way into the world over the last two thousand years or so.

I want to do this through a brief tour. I’m just going to put up some pictures on the screen of churches I have visited around the world in the last four years or so. I will make a few comments about each, but not many.

I simply want us to see how the flame has been fanned from the time Paul penned these words to Timothy to today.

There are countless other churches around the world I could talk about today, churches that are doing inspiring things, churches who we are privileged to be united with because of our common faith in Jesus.

I chose these for the simple reason that I was there and I took the photos. 😊

Bogota, Colombia, 2012

This isn't technically a church, but it's right beside the church we visited in a slum in Bogota in the spring of 2012 with a MCC Learning Tour.

Churches and para-church groups in this slum have been working for years to provide food and education and peace training for thousands of people who had been displaced from their farms by armed conflict.

The church was forced to work in some pretty desperate conditions, with the threat of violence always around the corner. Yet they kept working.

Just over a month ago, in Havana, Cuba, after nearly four years of negotiation, a peace agreement was signed between FARC and the Colombian government. This brought to an end the longest-running armed conflict in the Western hemisphere. Fighting between armed groups has killed some 260,000 people and displaced close to 7 million since 1958.

This church and these images speak to me about the longsuffering church. The church that endures in the face of seemingly insurmountable odds. The church that walks alongside the marginalized and the forgotten. The church that bears steady witness to peace in the shadow of near-constant violence.

The church that triumphs in the manner of Christ.

Ulm, Germany

Near the end of our summer holiday, Naomi and I went with our friends to the city of Ulm, just under an hour away from where we were staying.

We went to a church called the Ulm Minster, the tallest church in the world. Construction began in 1377 and it was originally designed to be a Roman Catholic cathedral. In 1530, the residents of Ulm had a referendum and decided to become Protestants, so the church became a Lutheran church. Construction wasn't completed until 1890.

This church speaks to me of beauty and of worship. The architecture and intricacy of design is stunning. To think of centuries of labour going into a house of worship, to think of the sustained devotion and patience and vision that these buildings required... It was breathtaking.

(Actually, it was literally breathtaking because Naomi and I took the stairs all the way to the top where we had a stunning view of the Bavarian countryside!)

And yet, like many cathedrals in Europe, this church felt more like a museum than a house of worship. Europe is becoming notoriously secular with few people actually worshipping in these magnificent buildings. One of the images that stuck with me was that of people walking around with cameras.

It speaks to me of the ever-present possibility that flames can grow cold. Churches can become museums where people walk around in awestruck wonder, taking pictures, capturing incredible imagery, but never bothering to wonder about the God who inspired all of this.

Bethlehem, 2016

This is the little evangelical Lutheran church we visited in Bethlehem during a learning tour earlier this year.

In comparison with the other more impressive houses of worship in nearby Jerusalem—the Dome of the Rock, the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, even the Church of the Nativity nearby in Bethlehem—this little church doesn't look like much.

It doesn't have the magnificent architecture of other sites, it has no holy relics, no centuries of history to sell and to fight over. It doesn't even have many worshipers—perhaps 30-40 church members and a bunch of tourists each week.

It is a tiny little outpost of the kingdom of God, caught in the crossfire between the Israeli state (often supported by Western Christians) and the Palestinian diaspora (and all its supporters).

A tiny little collection of Arab Christians, faithfully proclaiming the gospel of peace in the place of Jesus' birth while all around them there are wars and rumours of war. A church that says, "Don't forget about us! We are your sisters and your brothers!"

In this church, we worshiped in Arabic, English, and German. We sang hymns, we read Scripture, and we came to the table, where a young Arabic priest looked us each in the

eye, asked us our name, and then said, “Ryan, this is the body of Christ, broken for you...”

This church speaks to me of the forgotten church, the mustard seed church, the church that is often a flickering flame for peace in the face of what seem like overwhelming odds.

Dachau, Germany, 2016

This church is actually a little chapel. And a chapel in a very heartbreaking place. On our summer holidays this year, in between all the touristy stuff we did, we spent one day driving out to Dachau, the site of one of the more prominent concentration camps during the Second World War.

After making our way through the various buildings with all of the various reminders of the awful history of this place, we made our way to the outskirts of the camp where there were three little houses of worship: Roman Catholic, Jewish, and Protestant.

This is a tiny little protestant chapel, a stone’s throw from the ovens prepared for burning human bodies. I didn’t attend a service in this church. They do have regular services on Sundays, but we were there on a weekday.

But Nicholas did light a candle. A small thing to do, but as Jesus constantly reminds us, small things are anything but meaningless.

This church reminds me that the church can be part of both the wounding and the healing in our world. The German church was notoriously slow to respond to the terrors of Nazism.

There were exceptions, of course—courageous people like Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Martin Niemoller and the rest of the “Confessing Church”—but large portions of the German national church went along with or were silent in the face of Hitler’s brutal agenda. To the church’s shame.

But the church can also repent and move forward as a small agent of healing, of memory, and of a determined conviction to not remain silent again.

This church reminds me to always ask the questions: What evils do we ignore? Where are we silent when we ought to speak loudly and insistently for justice and for peace?

Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, 2015

This also isn't technically a church building. It's an arena on the fairground in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. This is where thousands of Mennonites from around the world gathered in the summer of 2015. We do this every six years. We will do so again in 2021 in Indonesia.

This church and this image speaks to me about a foretaste of eternity. People from around the world, speaking dozens of languages, people with different histories and stories, different trials, all coming together to celebrate our common bond.

And this is one small slice of the global body of Christ.

This image speaks to me of the multi-ethnic, multilingual, multicultural family of faith that has been brought together by Jesus Christ.

Paul writes to Timothy to not be afraid, to remember the gifts he has been given, to build up the church, to fan into a flame the gift of God.

And this is what has happened as centuries of Christians have "listened in" on this conversation between Paul and his protégé.

The flame has been fanned, and the fire has spread around the world. The church has borne patient witness, the church has suffered, the church has been a source of beauty and wonder, the church has forgotten, the church has remembered, the church has inspired, the church has led the way on the path of peace.

The church has grown.

In verses 7-8 of our text this morning, Paul tells Timothy:

For the Spirit God gave us does not make us timid, but gives us power, love and self-discipline. 8 So do not be ashamed of the testimony about our Lord or of me

his prisoner. Rather, join with me in suffering for the gospel, by the power of God.

This is what the church has done. This is who we have been.

Not perfectly, of course. We've made mistakes. We continue to make mistakes. But this morning's tour ought to remind us that this worldwide communion that we are part of is and has always been a source of healing and hope, forgiveness and salvation, community and redemption.

The church has *not* been timid. The church *has* exhibited power, love and self-discipline. It's easy to read passages like this as individuals and think, "well, I sometimes feel timid... I don't feel like I have much power, love, or self-discipline!"

But World Communion Sunday reminds us that each one of us is part of a big and beautiful "we"

A tiny little flame has been fanned into a fire that brings warmth and light.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.

