

# **Tattoo**

**“Your mark is a flame.”**

**Exodus 20:18-21; Joel 2:28-29**

*Heart Strings: Lessons for relationships from the Ancient Heroes #5*

Rev. John H. Hice

May 31, 2009

First United Methodist Church of Royal Oak, Michigan

## **Coping**

Being connected is so important.

A young man across town had been critically injured in a motorcycle accident. All his friends kept vigil at the hospital night and day for almost a week until he died.

He wasn't a part of the church. As far as I know, neither were most of his friends. Their tattoos and body piercings might have made them seem threatening. But theirs was a culture of young people who were still honest and hard working, loved God and country as well as monster trucks and bikes. So, by the time his family met with me for funeral arrangements and what care I could offer, his friends had already conducted their first rituals to deal with the loss of a friend.

His parents told me that they had taken his cycle, chained it to the back of a monster truck and dragged all over a field off-road. Then they took what was left of it and shot it with rifles and shotguns until they ran out of ammunition. Finally, they set the bike on fire and kept adding fuel until even the engine block had melted down.

The last ritual before the funeral involved the help of an artist who obliged several of them with rather large memorial tattoos. Somewhere on their bodies would be a permanent reminder of a connection they had with their brother and friend.

I used to think that tattoos were for sailors who used them to remember their ship and the sea; and if anyone else got one it was for boasting or defiance.

They taught me a tattoo could be for something else: to make a connection, to commit to belonging forever.

## **Belonging**

The people of Israel were still a bunch of fugitive slaves running through the desert when this strange, powerful God who rained terror on the Egyptians to let them

go met them again. And God gave them a law to live by: Don't: serve other gods instead of God, make idols to worship, take God's name in vain, work on the day God set aside for rest. Don't murder, steal, break your marriage covenant or lie. Honor your parents. And don't get caught in the trap of wishing for something that belongs to someone else.

We usually hear these and memorize them and treat them like a personal code of morality. And well we should. Beyond that though, the commandments reveal the character of God, and they set the behavior of a nation, setting them apart from all the rest of the world to say they belong to him. This Law is like a tattoo, it is a mark upon their lives that connects them to each other and connects them to God.

Strange, then, that as much as they want to belong they want to be separated. Just after this gift is given they have a chance to enter the presence of the Holy One who has saved them they recoil with fear. They want a connection, but they don't want to be too close. They'll take the tattoo but want the safety of a Moses or a priest to actually enter the cloud of lightning and the place of thunder for them. And so for ages they bear the tattoo, but forego the Presence.

Something is incomplete. The tattoo is not enough. So the prophet Joel points to a new day when fear is removed and the connection is direct: power comes to everyone. The day is coming when my Spirit will be poured out on all flesh; the young shall see visions and the old shall dream dreams.

And when this happens, the power and the presence will mobilize a people to mission and ministry. By the power of God they will change this world into the kind of place God has intended to be from the beginning of time.

When you look at a global collection of communities that are so disrupted by greed and fear and you might wonder what God is waiting for. When can this connection be complete?

Today.

The Bible records the story of Jesus' disciples who were gathered in a room after he had died and was resurrected. It says they were waiting, not really connected, wondering what to do. Then the thunder came, and the rush of a mighty wind, and it says the Spirit lit upon each of them as fire and they rushed into the streets to be witnesses and world-changers that bore with them the very presence of God.

Pentecost. And that's today: not just a day to commemorate what once happened; but a day for new thunder to move us; a day to recall that now our tattoo is not only a law to guide us. It is a day to remember our tattoo is a fire.

Church: be filled with the Spirit. The Spirit has entered your presence. God is with you. There is nothing you cannot do.

### **Connected**

Laura and I recently saw a friend of ours, maybe to say, "Goodbye," for a long time. She's a young woman who was part of a Disciple Bible study we led. She was already a bit of an adventurer, but as she studied the scriptures and considered the way they can point a person to following Jesus in their life, more of a change came over her. She started working in a program down in the city that gave care to women trapped in commercial sex professions. She started to consider the Presence in her life, and a personal ministry God might lead her into. So, she sensed a call that might lead her to Afghanistan to care for others that might contribute to making peace. She sent applications to schools that coupled graduate degree programs in public policy with field work in the Peace Corps. Now, off she goes to change the world. I can't get over it. When we offered the study, I had no idea what might become of it, or what might become of her.

You see, with the help of the Bible and close connections she made with others in the class, she opened her eyes to the presence. She is connected without a go-between. Her tattoo is a fire.

You don't have to join the Peace Corps to belong to Jesus. You don't have to go to Afghanistan to change the world. It can happen right here and it can be today. You are connected; and your tattoo is a fire.