

The Fellowship of the Burning Heart

Luke 24:13-35
Exodus 4:1-5

April 30, 2017
Faith Community

Tony Campolo is one of my favorite preachers. He likes to tell the story of how one day, just before speaking at a Pentecostal worship service, eight men took him to a back room, had him kneel, laid their hands on his head, and began to pray. That's a good thing, he said, except that they prayed a long time, and the longer they prayed, the more tired they got, and the more tired they got, the more they leaned on his head. "I want to tell you that when eight guys are leaning on your head, it doesn't feel so good."

"To make matters worse, one of the men wasn't even praying for Tony. He went on and on about some guy named Charlie Stoltzfus: 'Dear Lord, you know Charlie Stoltzfus. He lives in that silver trailer down the road a mile on the right-hand side.' (Tony wanted to point out that God probably didn't need directions.) 'Lord, Charlie told me this morning he's going to leave his wife and three kids. Step in and do something, God. Bring that family back together.'

Tony writes that he finally got the Pentecostal preachers off his head, delivered his message, and got in his car to drive home. As he drove onto the Pennsylvania Turnpike, he picked up a hitchhiker:

"We drove a few minutes, and I said, 'Hi, my name's Tony Campolo. What's yours?' He said, 'My name is Charlie Stoltzfus.' I couldn't believe it!

"I got off the turnpike at the next exit and headed back. He got a bit uneasy with that, and after a few minutes he said, 'Hey mister, where are you taking me?' I said, 'I'm taking you home.' He narrowed his eyes and asked, 'Why?'

"I said, 'Because you just left your wife and three kids, right?' With shock written all over his face, he plastered himself against the car door and never took his eyes off me.

"Then I really did him in as I drove right to his silver trailer. When I pulled up, his eyes seemed to bulge as he asked, 'How did you know that I lived here?' I said, 'God told me.' (I believe God did tell me.)

"When he opened the trailer door his wife exclaimed, 'You're back! You're back!' He whispered in her ear and the more he talked, the bigger her eyes got.

“Then I said with real authority, ‘The two of you sit down. I’m going to talk, and you two are going to listen.’ Man, did they listen! That afternoon I led those two young people to Jesus Christ.”¹

Today we have two stories of negative thinkers who, like the two in that story, in spite of their own feelings of inadequacies and disappointments were nevertheless used in mighty ways.

In the Old Testament, Moses is standing before the burning bush and hearing his marching orders. He, a fugitive shepherd, is going to stand up to the most powerful person in the world and then take an entire nation out from slavery and into a land filled with good things that had been set apart just for them.

Yeah, right!

As one might expect, Moses comes up with every reason why he was not the one to pull this off. God responded to each one in a way that pointed out that yes indeed he was in fact God’s choice. One of his excuses especially stands out:

Then Moses answered, “But suppose they do not believe me or listen to me, but say, ‘The LORD did not appear to you.’” The LORD said to him, “What is that in your hand?” He said, “A staff.” And he said, “Throw it on the ground.” So he threw the staff on the ground, and it became a snake; and Moses drew back from it. Then the LORD said to Moses, “Reach out your hand, and seize it by the tail”—so he reached out his hand and grasped it, and it became a staff in his hand—“so that they may believe that the LORD, the God of their ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has appeared to you.” (Exodus 4:1-5, NRSV)

It was just a shepherd’s staff. Nothing fancy. He’d probably used it for years. But here’s the point; Moses, use what you have. God can take who you are, just the way you are, and work wonders. You’ve got everything you need, most of all, you have me.

Moses, you’re the man!

¹ John Ortberg, *The Life You’ve Always Wanted: Spiritual Disciplines for Ordinary People* (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 2002), pp. 104-5

Friends, in the same way, your biggest obstacle, your greatest stumbling block, that which stands between you and a God sized opportunity, could very well be nothing but your very own self-imposed limitations and shortcomings.

Scroll ahead a few centuries to the very first Easter. My guess is that it's sometime in the afternoon. News is spreading about Jesus. There are these two guys walking along a road; shuffling along may be a better way of putting it.

Dragging their feet.

Dejected.

Discouraged.

Not long before this they were on top of the world with visions of a different world, a better world, a God honoring world, and it was all because of Jesus. Every day brought something to learn, a chance to grow, a chance to build a future. They were just regular guys but thanks to Jesus they were part of something special. They themselves were special.

All that was behind them now. Jesus had died. People in power had won again. They'd heard stories of a missing body, but then there's that fake news thing, and just plain rumors.

Along comes this 'stranger' who points out they just might be wrong, and by the end of the story their souls had been reignited. Jesus was alive!

So there was Moses, as terrified as he was, being reminded that he already had everything he needed. And there were these two guys, with the very source of their hopes and dreams walking right next to them.

And here we are. Friends, I've been with you a little more than a month now as your interim pastor. Here's what I've seen so far:

- You have an outstanding location, the center of pretty much everything.
- Your building is superbly designed and well maintained.
- Your music program is second to none for a church this size, and even larger.
- You have a heart for mission that is touching lives, internationally as well as here at home.
- That playground out back is a treasure.

- And look at the young people with whom you've been blessed.

Here's the problem. All of that good stuff will do you precious little good without your being anchored in the person of Jesus Christ.

We have something that no other organization on the planet can claim. Without him, without Jesus, we're just another service club or community organization.

Instead, imagine the freedom of being loved just the way you are, with nothing to prove.

Imagine people loving you enough to hold your feet to the fire in regards to your own personal growth and development.

What if prayer were not a tired out speech just before dinner but rather a relationship that molded and shaped you, giving form and direction to your everyday life?

What if you couldn't wait to make it to worship because it's the single most important thing you can be about?

Imagine the Bible being a field manual for what it means to become a mature person, offering a real alternative to a pointlessly self-centered culture.

Imagine moving from a religion to a way of life that changes you, your values, your priorities, and in turn people around you and the world itself.

Imagine all that happening here. With you.

Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us? (Luke 24:32)

Friends, the most important thing you can possibly do is to become part of the fellowship of the burning heart.