
Playing With Fire

**An article from the *Cathedral Times*
by the Very Reverend Samuel G. Candler,
Dean of the Cathedral of St. Philip**

Let's hear it for acolytes!

About a month ago, I was invited to preach in the small, Presbyterian Church of Magnetawan, Ontario. That village is quite small, but the Presbyterian Church there is vigorous and active. I took the opportunity to mention several of the differences between the Presbyterian Church and the Episcopal Church. There are some obvious differences concerning church organization ("presbyters" and "episcopoi").

On that day, however, one of the things for which I gave particular thanks was "acolytes." I know that several other churches, besides the Episcopal Church, use acolytes. But it seems to me that Episcopal acolytes have always been of the exceptional and risky variety.

In my own acolyte days, back in Newnan, Georgia, we never knew which one of us would be tapped to serve because one of our buddies had not shown up again. We were often sloppy and sleepy, but we loved it. On one memorable occasion, I actually fell asleep during the sermon, my chair fell over backwards, and I fell out of the chancel entirely. (Is anyone else a member of the Eutychnus Society? See Acts 20:9)

And, of course, the best fun about being an acolyte was that we were given permission to play with fire. Have you ever wondered why we give the most dangerous part of the liturgy to our youngest members?

Preaching the sermon or singing the anthem is rarely dangerous (though sometimes a preacher can be dangerous!). What is dangerous is trying to light those altar candles. I have seen entire congregations hushed in horror while a young acolyte struggled to set fire to one small wick without lighting everything else around him. Then, we ask the acolytes to carry torches above their heads, where they can rarely see them, without spilling hot wax on them or their buddies.

It takes a sense of risk and adventure to be an Episcopal acolyte. And it takes a sense of risk and adventure for adults to entrust the fire to those younger members of our congregation. But the stewardship of that fire is important. Acolytes represent the stewardship of fire for all of us followers of Christ. In fact, the word "acolyte" comes from the Greek word for "follower." An acolyte is a follower of Christ.

All of us are meant to be acolytes, "followers" of Christ, and stewards of the fire of God. That is the same fire that Moses saw in the wilderness one day. It was a sight that both awed and amazed him. The bush was on fire, but it was not consumed. That image should represent the relationship with God that each of us should have. God's fire burns and gives light and energizes us, but it stops short of consuming us. Even when we are on fire for God, we are not consumed.

At the front of that little Presbyterian church in Magnetawan is posted an image and a motto. It is the old motto of the Presbyterian Church itself. *Nec tamen consumebatur*, it says; "yet it was not consumed." The bush was burning, but it was not consumed. That verse is Exodus 3.2, from the story of Moses and the burning bush.

Let's hear it for all our acolytes this year, all those entrusted to be followers of Christ and entrusted with the fire of God. It

is a calling for each of us. May our playing with fire lead us to glory everlasting.

Sam Candler signature



The Very Rev. Sam Candler