

Pentecost 2012  
May 26 & 27  
All Saints Parish  
Rev. Fred Daley

Holy Spirit: The Fire Within

A man bought a house and decided to get rid of an old bamboo tree that was growing into his driveway. He cut the plant down: taking an axe to its roots, and after destroying as much of it as he could, he poured bluestone, a powerful plant poison on what remained. Finally he filled the hole where the plant had been, with shovels of gravel, which he pressed down tightly and then paved the gravel over with a thick layer of cement. (A bit obsessive, perhaps...?!) Two years later, the cement heaved as the bamboo plant began to slowly break through the pavement: its life principle - that blind pressure to grow - was not thwarted by axed, poison and cement!

My brothers and sisters - we see this same, incredible - seemingly sightless - spirit in all things. In everything from the atom to the human person there is a blind power to unite with other things and open. Nothing can stop this: If you put a two inch band of solid steel around a growing watermelon, it will, as it grows, burst the steel! *Everything is driven outward*: rocks..., plants..., insects..., animals... are just as erotic and relentlessly driven as are human beings. There is at some level, a stunning similarity between a bamboo plant pushing through the pavement, a baby feeding, a young adolescent driven by hormones, the tangible restlessness of a singles bar, and Mother Teresa kneeling consciously in prayer before God!

Desire..., Desire..., Desire is working in each case - sometimes blindly and sometimes consciously. St. Paul would say that, in each instance the Holy Spirit is trying to pray through something or somebody.

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On this first day of Pentecost, we see the young Christian community becoming aware of that power - that fire within and among them that not even death itself could destroy - the Holy Spirit working through, and sometimes despite, the Church for the last 2,000 years...

I was talking to a good Friend, Fr. Tim Taugher from St. Francis of Assisi Parish in Binghamton, about what he was preaching on this weekend and he shared that the title of his homily - which each week is posted on a sign outside the Church - is:

“The Spirit is alive and She’s on the loose - breaking through all boundaries”!

My Sisters and brothers, this gift of the spirit: that ‘fire of fire’ is what we are celebrating today; that Spark of the Divine that is in each and every one of us and in all of creation! Alleluia! Alleluia!

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For a few moments on this Pentecost weekend, I would like to reflect on the question: What is Spirituality?

Do we see ourselves as Spiritual? This can be difficult for us as Catholics. Many of us were given the idea that “spirituality” was reserved for priests and nuns and, in particular the Saints, who were the most holy; and the rest of us just plugged along.... (And, if truth be told, from what we learned about most of the Saints, they seemed pretty boring - with lives that were really not all that attractive to us.)

Among the significant teachings of the Second Vatican Council is that we are *all* called to holiness! And, to understand spirituality we need to understand that *hunger*, that *fire of fire*, that *desire*, that *holy spirit* that is within all things.

Plato said: “We are fired into life with a madness that comes from the Gods.” To be human - to be alive - is to be free and restless: dis-satisfied, frustrated, aching. We are so over-charged with desire that it’s hard to come to simple rest. Desire is *always* stronger than satisfaction.

There is within us a fundamental dis-ease, an unquenchable fire that renders us incapable, in this life, of coming to full peace. This desire lies at the center of our lives, in the marrow of our bones, in the deep recesses of our soul.

Here I'm going to say something that is quite counter-cultural: We humans are *not* restless beings who occasionally get restless; serene persons who once in a while are obsessed by desire. In reality, the reverse is true: we are persons driven - forever obsessed, innately dis-eased; living - as Thoreau once suggested - "lives of quiet desperation." It is a *false understanding* of spirituality that inspires dreams of a life full of peace and contentment...; stillness and equilibrium.

This *desire*, this *spirit*, this *fire*, is a gift because it is continually calling us as individuals and as community to something more. And, thank God for this Spirit because without this desire driving humans - the world would still be flat...; slavery would still be acceptable...; we'd still be resolving our conflicts by hitting each other over the head with clubs (...well, no doubt we still do way too much of that...)! It is this unquenched desire, this spirit which continually compels us into 'becoming;' ...becoming more and more the persons and community that God calls us to be!

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This desire has different moods and faces:

- ❖ sometimes desire hits as pain: dissatisfaction, frustration and aching;
- ❖ sometimes desire expresses itself as a deep energy toward something beautiful and more important to us than anything else: toward: love..., beauty..., creativity..., a future beyond our limited present!

Desire can show itself as aching pain *or* as delicious hope.

The ancients and spiritual giants describe this pull and desire as ultimately the pull to be once again with God from where we came. Plato said: "We are on fire because our soul came from beyond and is drawing us toward itself;" and St. Augustine said: "You have made us for yourself, O God, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you."

Ultimately, spirituality is what we do with that desire... what we do with our longings..., both in terms of handling the pain and the hope they bring us.

So: *everyone* has a “spirituality” ... it’s what we do with desire. No one has the luxury of choosing to be spiritual or not. What we do with that fire within - how we channel it - *is* our *spirituality*. Our spirituality is more about whether we can sleep at night than about whether or not we go to church. Spirituality is about being integrated or falling apart. Spirituality is what shapes our actions.

Desire makes us act and when we act - what we do will lead to a greater integration - a greater (w)holiness - a greater vibrancy, or a disintegration within our personalities..., our minds..., our bodies..., our world... The habits - disciplines - we use to shape our desire, form the basis of our spirituality.

The spiritual question is: “Are we channeling our energy in a healthy direction, toward integration; or are we channeling our desire in an unhealthy direction leading to destruction of self and others?”

The role of religion is to give us various programs and disciplines to channel our desires and energies in life. Jesus gave us a vision of how to live whole, integrated lives.

Healthy spirituality does two things:

First, spirituality gives us the energy and fire so that we do not lose our vitality, our “in-touchness” with the beauty and joy of living. (The opposite of being a spiritual person is not being a pagan. The opposite of being a spiritual person is to have no energy, to have lost the zest for living. Lying on the couch watching TV, taking in beer intravenously!)

The second task of spirituality is to keep us “glued together” - integrated - so that we don’t fall apart and die. Spirituality gives us ‘holy balance.’

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In his book, The Holy Longing, Ronald Rolheiser gives three contemporary examples illustrating how we might handle our desires:

1. Mother Teresa of Calcutta: Mo. Teresa was a dynamo of energy - a human bulldozer - an energy driven woman; and - as we learn from those who knew her, was not always the easiest person to be around; and, as we also know now from her own journals, spent much of her time in a "dark night of the soul," of unfulfilled desire. But through all else, she was capable of disciplining her energy, her desire and focusing it on God and working for the poor. She channeled *Eros* in a creative, living, integrated way.
2. Janis Joplin, who some of us remember as a rock-star back in the late 60s, who died at the age of 27, from an overdose of life. She too was very spiritual: exceptionally loaded with a fiery, rare energy. But her energy could not be focused and disciplined, and eventually killed her: drugs, booze, sex, and performing became her spirituality; rather than being healthy, her spirituality brought self-destruction.
3. The third example is Princess Diana, who was in some ways like Mother Teresa, choosing some things which brought healthy integration: devoting her energy to her family and using her position to reach out to the poor; taking a strong public stance in promoting effective treatment of HIV and becoming the leading voice globally in raising consciousness about the devastating consequences of abandoned land-mines. She was however, also, a bit like Janis Joplin - drawn to "life in the fast-lane," and choosing some things which brought an unhealthy disintegration and, eventually, her death.

Most of us, like Princess Diana, have a bit of Mother Teresa and a bit of Janis Joplin in us. The choice of how to respond - is ours!

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As we celebrate Pentecost, on this Memorial Day week-end, it strikes me that there is no more powerful illustration of the destructive, disintegrative use of our God-given energy than war. War is hell. War is humanity turning its energy against... humanity! As we remember all the women and men whose lives have been lost in war throughout human history, let us pray that the Holy Spirit - the Creative force of all life - enlighten our hearts and minds, integrate us into the (w)holy people of peace and justice that God created us to be... and, in so doing, renew the face of the earth. Amen!