

Pentecost
(May 27, 2012)

What's Gotten into You?

A few years ago in *America* magazine, Diane Bergant, a scripture scholar, began her commentary on today's readings with the question, "What's gotten into you?" It's a question that we usually ask when someone is acting strangely, or in some unaccustomed way, or maybe even outrageously. But she felt that it was appropriate for today's feast. The very people who for days, even weeks, had hidden themselves in fear for their lives, were out and about and acting in astonishing ways. They no longer lived in secret. In fact, they were calling attention to themselves by their behavior. What had gotten into them?

Well, as we all know, it was the Spirit. "They were all filled with the Holy Spirit." It's a simple statement that no longer startles us. These previously terrified people were all filled with the dynamic power of God – the power that refreshes and recreates, the power that comforts and heals, the power that forgives and reconciles. The Spirit burned within them like tongues of fire, and they went forth and proclaimed the message of God's love manifested in the resurrection of Jesus.

Now this same Spirit was given to all of us when we were baptized into the death and resurrection of Jesus and confirmed in the power of the Spirit. So if we received the same Spirit as the disciples did on that first Pentecost, why can't we do the same marvelous deeds? But we can. In situations where violence and hatred prevail we can be kind and gentle. Kindness and gentleness in such situations can be heroic and may make us fearful like those disciples before they received the Spirit. But don't forget what happened to them after the Spirit got into them – and don't forget that that same Spirit has also gotten into us.

Generosity can be countercultural wherever greed and selfishness reign. And how much harm might be avoided if we all had a bit more patience?

The Spirit that Jesus sent us from the Father is a Spirit of reconciliation. "Whose sins you shall forgive they are forgiven." I can't

imagine there is anything that we are not to forgive. It is the Spirit that helps us not to hold grudges or nurture vengeance if we will only let the Spirit work in us. It is the Spirit of truth, the Spirit that directs us into lives of honesty and integrity.

Now you know, on that first Pentecost Sunday it was only a few frightened people who suddenly burst out of that upper room and actually began a movement that set fire to the world. We feel its effects right now in what are doing today. We would not be in this church if they had not acted on what the Spirit prompted them to do. The implications for us right here and now are enormous. The world we live in, our nation, even our Church are all in crisis. For us the crisis in the Church is reaching untenable proportions. We don't seem to understand what either Jesus or the Spirit are calling us to do as loving, understanding, compassionate people, and so the problems just keep getting worse and worse.

You may be familiar with a quotation from Fr. Teilhard de Chardin, the French Jesuit scientist, theologian, mystic, who once wrote, "The day will come when, after harnessing the winds, the tides, and gravitation, we shall harness for God the energies of Love. And on that day for the second time in the history of the world we will have discovered fire." That's what we need to do. We need to discover fire. The Spirit is also the Spirit of love and Luke tells us that that Spirit came to those fearful people in the upper room in the form of fire. We need to be set on fire with that same Spirit of love that makes all those other seemingly impossible things possible, kindness and gentleness in the face of violence and hatred, forgiveness and reconciliation in the face of sin and opposition, understanding and compassion when we disagree with others or when they suffer in ways we do not understand.

Now listen to another quotation from a treatise on the Holy Spirit from St. Basil the Great, "Through the Spirit we acquire a likeness to God, indeed, we attain what is beyond our most sublime aspirations – we become God." We become God! Now that's a pretty bold statement. But it's a commonplace among the Fathers of the church. They were convinced that through the gift of the Holy Spirit somehow with God's power in us we become divinized. We become God. I suspect if a theologian today proposed that he would immediately become suspect in the halls of the

Vatican, but that was a common teaching in the early centuries of the Church. It's too bad we don't hear more of it today. If we could take that seriously, then we would all learn what it really means really to love, and we would all catch fire, and before you know it everybody would be asking, "What gotten into them?"