

## “Sacred Stubbornness”

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21st Sunday after Pentecost



### First Reading

from *The Four Elements* by John O’Donohue

Though the Christian tradition has neglected the Holy Spirit for a long time, it had nevertheless always insisted on the Holy spirit as the Immediacy of God. Descending in the form of tongues of fire at Pentecost is an indication that the Holy spirit is the secret hearth where all Eros is kindled.

### Second Reading

from Hildegard of Bingen

“I, the highest and fiery power, have kindled every spark of life .... I, the fiery life of divine essence, am aflame beyond the beauty of the meadows, I gleam in the waters, and I burn in the sun, moon, and the stars.”

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Many years ago when I was graduating from seminary—the first one—my sister and brother-in-law gave me a huge gift. And by huge, I mean *really* huge. It was a Merriam-Webster dictionary, the kind that you would find in a public library on a pivoting rack. I have no idea how much it weighed, but it was quite the treasure in its time, a sort of Bible of the English language that demanded reverence and awe by its sheer size and presence. And I proceeded to move this thing around the country for about thirty years, hanging onto it long after it had become outdated, until one day—all at once—I realized that I could just type a word into a Google box and get the fastest, most up-to-the-minute results. So the day came when I put the big fat dictionary into the trunk of my car and hauled it over to the Friends of the Library in Middletown, New York, placing it in the bin and driving off quickly before they could have the opportunity to refuse it.

In the Google age, I sometimes enjoy typing a common word that everyone would know, just to see if the definition lands the way I think it would. It’s a really nerdy thing to admit, rising to the level of alphabetizing the spice rack. This week I looked up the word “stubborn.” Stubbornness is something

I've often been accused of by those closest to me. I've always preferred the word "tenacious," or even "highly principled." Some have called me obstinate. I would say instead that I am just "focused." Merriam-Webster defines the word "stubborn" as 1) unreasonably or perversely unyielding, or mulish, or 2) justifiably unyielding or resolute. I choose number two.

In our travels through what we have come to call "Celtic Consciousness" we have enjoyed the interwoven qualities of divinity that are expressed in the ground beneath our feet, and in the watery flow of feeling and emotion. Today we visit another element, which is fire. It's a little hard to talk about fire right now, given our location and recent history. We're still watching the fires that have been raging in southern California, and it's difficult not to focus on fire as a destructive force. For a moment this morning, however, I'd like us to see the spark of something far more positive. Just like the word "stubborn" which has positive and negative qualities, fire is descriptive of the energy we call life, prana, eros, life force, Holy Spirit, divine essence, divine light.

From spiritual and faith traditions of every stripe, comes terminology through the metaphor of fire to describe the indescribable. What is it that breathes us and beats our hearts? What is the creative force behind the universe, the Big Bang, the explosive force that gave us birth and continues to animate the whole of what we call creation? And beyond that, what is this fire within us that gives us our own creative energy, that, if we were to tenaciously remove all impediments would flow together into a force that would change and enlighten the world for every good and holy purpose?

Fire, you see, speaks of divine will within us. The spark of life, which by itself might seem insignificant, yet when it comes together communally, feeds itself into a flame of light and warmth and brightness, that gives life to the world. I am convinced that it takes some fire in our souls to get through the times in which we live. We live in a constant rhetorical barrage that is bewildering and exhausting, and it takes more energy than we can manufacture on our own to become justifiably unyielding and resolute, to greet the world with a holy tenacity that knows when to go with the flow and when to say, "we shall not be moved." Think of the solar plexus; place your hand there and breathe. This is the power center, the place of decision, the exercise of choice, the home of sacred stubbornness.

It is not a coincidence that the Hebrew and Christian scriptures speak of the fire of divine essence. God spoke to Moses from a burning bush. At Pentecost the Holy Spirit descended on the disciples appearing as cloven tongues of fire. And then there is the 12th century mystic and visionary Hildegard of Bingen, a German nun who spoke often of the fiery light of divine essence, which she could describe as coursing through her body and soul. In a letter that she wrote late in life, she describes this longstanding experience of fire.

*From my early childhood, before my bones, nerves and veins were fully strengthened, I have always seen this vision in my soul, even to the present time when I am more than seventy years old. In this vision my soul, as God would have it, rises up high into the vault of heaven and into the changing sky and spreads itself out among different peoples, although they are far away from me in distant lands and places. And because I see them this way in my soul, I observe them in accord with the shifting of clouds and other created things. I do not hear them with my outward ears, nor do I perceive them by the thoughts*

*of my own heart or by any combination of my five senses, but in my soul alone, while my outward eyes are open. So I have never fallen prey to ecstasy in the visions, but I see them wide awake, day and night. And I am constantly fettered by sickness, and often in the grip of pain so intense that it threatens to kill me, but God has sustained me until now. The light which I see thus is not spatial, but it is far, far brighter than a cloud which carries the sun. I can measure neither height, nor length, nor breadth in it; and I call it "the reflection of the living Light." And as the sun, the moon, and the stars appear in water, so writings, sermons, virtues, and certain human actions take form for me and gleam.*

In answer to this "living light," John O'Donohue speaks of how the Christian tradition has severely neglected the Holy Spirit, which he calls the "sacred hearth where the fire of Eros is kindled." We are a collection of glowing embers. In purely sociological terms, it may seem like we are aging, tired, and spent. From a marketing perspective, it may seem like we have very little time to figure out how this or any other church will make its way into the mid-21st century and beyond. We are setting about the sacred work of budgets and planning, asking one another what we can give to a work that we believe in during the coming year. We can articulate what we need to do and how we need to do it. What we cannot quantify is the power of the fire within us. And when we bring these embers into contact with one another, something gets kindled that is nearly impossible to extinguish. And why would you extinguish it?

We are made of light. It is the light that enlightens every soul who comes into the world, according to John's gospel. Over the next several weeks, let's see if we might not fan these embers into a stubborn reflective light, and become a people who are powerful, resolute, and prepared to act.

Let's get our Hildegard on.

