

## **Another Fine Mess You've Gotten Us Into**

*January 11, 2009*

(Epiphany 1 - Year B)

Acts 19: 1-7

*St. Alban's Episcopal Church, Waco, Texas*

When I was a kid, my brother and I used to love to watch old movies of the Three Stooges and of Laurel and Hardy with my dad.

My dad taught my brother and I all about the fine art of slapstick humor through these old movies.

The three of us guys would lay on the floor in our family room and laugh hysterically as Stan Laurel and Oliver Hardy would walk into closed doors, would fall down the stairs or would stick their fingers into electrical sockets.

Both Laurel and Hardy always seem to be getting themselves into situations that they had not planned on.

And the rotund Hardy would say to the skinny Laurel, in disdain: "Well, that's another fine mess you've gotten me into."

In the scripture reading from the Acts of the Apostles, we hear about a group of followers of Jesus who are in Ephesus.

It seems that some of these followers of Jesus only know about the baptisms with water that John the Baptist had given.

However, most of the rest of the followers of Jesus had been baptized with water into the Holy Spirit of Jesus.

Then, the Apostle Paul comes onto the scene in Ephesus and asks these followers:

"Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you became believers?"

And I can then imagine these followers answering Paul in the style of Laurel and Hardy:

*{scratching top of head}* "No, I have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit - have you, Ollie?"

*{pretending to flip necktie}* "No, Stanley, I certainly have not heard that there is a Holy Spirit."

Then, the Apostle Paul asks these followers:

“Into what then were you baptized?

And our Laurel and Hardy followers answer:

*{scratching top of head}* “We were baptized into John’s baptism.”

*{pretending to flip necktie}* “Yes, we certainly were.”

The Apostle Paul then instructs these followers that the baptism of John the Baptist was only intended for repentance and to point to Jesus.

The Apostle Paul then encourages these followers who were only baptized into the baptism of John the Baptist to go ahead and be baptized in the name of Jesus.

So Paul baptizes them - and he lays hands on them - and they receive the Holy Spirit.

Then, these new Christians begin to speak in tongues and to prophesy.

And Oliver Hardy, now filled with the Holy Spirit, looks at Stan Laurel and says:

“Well, that’s another fine mess you’ve gotten us into.”

When *we* were baptized with water and the Holy Spirit, I wonder if *we* realized what a fine mess we had gotten ourselves into.

For the baptism that we all received in the font was not just a baptism in calm and serene water.

The baptism that we received was into the life and death of Jesus Christ, which is a baptism into churning waters and a raging fire.

And we have God’s unpredictable Holy Spirit to thank for this fine mess that we have gotten ourselves into.

After today’s sermon, we will all reaffirm the promises and vows that we made through our baptism.

We will remember, once again, the details about the fine mess that we have gotten ourselves into.

One of the promises that we make in baptism is that we are to seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbor as ourselves.

And the only way that we can keep this promise is with God’s help.

The only way that we can seek and serve all people is with the help of that messy, crazy, unpredictable Holy Spirit.

Recently, there was a priest in this diocese, whom I did not know personally, who was suffering from cancer. His name is the Rev. Lefy Vallecillo Ortiz, or you could just call him Lefy.

Lefy was living outside of Temple.

And the other priests in Central Texas agreed to sign up and to take Lefy communion each month during this past fall.

Back in August, I signed up to take Lefy communion during December. Then, December and the holiday rush arrived.

Procrastinating the duty I had signed up for, I finally made arrangements to bring communion to Lefy on the Sunday afternoon right before Christmas.

After a full morning of services here at St. Alban's that Sunday, I got in my car and drove down toward Temple.

Driving down I-35, with only 3 days left until Christmas Eve, I thought about all the Christmas shopping that I still had to do.

I thought about the Christmas Eve sermon that I still had not even started to write.

I cursed myself for signing up for this duty during the crazy month of December.

And, I thought about how I had overextended my self and I said to myself:

“Fisher, this is another fine mess you've gotten yourself into.”

Yet, God's Holy Spirit led me into the driveway of Lefy's house.

Before I met him, I had pictured Lefy to be a very old priest who had experienced many years in the ordained ministry.

However, Lefy was only a 46 year old man, with cancer that had riddled his body.

He was now bed-ridden, with pain medication pouring into his veins through an IV.

Since we were about the same age, we shared stories about our children and our wives, about seminary and about our ministry.

Our conversation was holy and real and filled with the Spirit of Jesus. I shared communion with him and I blessed him by making the sign of the cross on his forehead.

After the blessing, Lefy told me that he believed that he was going to die soon.

As I left Lefy's house on that busy Sunday afternoon before Christmas, I thanked God that I had been baptized in the Holy Spirit.

I thanked God for the wonderful gift of my visit with a dying, young priest.

I thanked God that the Holy Spirit had gotten me into such a fine mess as to seek and serve Christ in all persons.

As it turns out, Lefy died last Sunday.

Yet, I am convinced that the Spirit of Jesus that I was baptized into led me to seek and serve Christ in Lefy Ortiz.

In your own life, when someone in your office or at your school gets on your nerves, it could mean that the Holy Spirit is leading you to seek and serve Christ by loving the unlovable.

When you and your spouse have a fight, it could be that the Holy Spirit is baptizing you into the mess of forgiveness and reconciliation.

When you don't agree with the lifestyle or the choices of your children, it could be possible that the Holy Spirit is baptizing you into the mess of tolerance and acceptance.

So, seek and serve Christ in all persons.

Give thanks for your baptism into God's Holy Spirit of love.

For your baptism is another fine mess that God has gotten you into.

AMEN.