

After Mass last weekend, a woman visitor came up and said, 'You are much better than the priest we have at our church. He generally speaks for 45 minutes and says nothing.' "Thank you," I replied. "Yes," she continued, "You did it in 15 minutes!"

Do you know what is the safest place in the world?

Avoid riding in automobiles because they are responsible for 20% of all fatal accidents. DO NOT STAY HOME because 17% of all accidents occur in the home. Avoid WALKING because 14% of all accidents occur to pedestrians. Avoid traveling by air, rail, or water, because 16% of all accidents involve these forms of transportation. Of the remaining 33%, 32% of all deaths occur in hospitals. Above all else, AVOID HOSPITALS!

Which leaves us the safest place in the world – CHURCH! Only .0001% of all deaths occur in worship services in church – probably people who die of boredom during 3-point homilies – but I'm not going there! Also, Bible study is safe too. The percentage of deaths that occur while reading the bible is even less. So come to church every week – IT WILL SAVE YOUR LIFE. And we're under the same management for over 2000 years – a proven track record – you're in good hands at church!

OK, now down to the 3 Pentecost points. First, a word about the Holy Spirit. Most of us grew up praying to God –while picturing Jesus. The Holy Spirit was just someone who flew in and out for the sacrament of Confirmation. We need to do better than that in our understanding of the third person of the Holy Trinity. Here's something very traditional, from St. Bernard of Clairvaux: "If we are right to think that the Father gives and the Son receives the kiss, we do not err in thinking that the kiss itself is the Holy Spirit." A kiss suddenly makes the Holy Spirit a lot more interesting! Or this little poem by Edwina Gately, called PROPHETIC MISSION: SNIFFING OUT THE KINGDOM: Once upon a time/We captured God/ and we put God in a box and we put a beautiful velvet curtain around the box. We placed candles and flowers around the box and /we said to the poor and dispossessed, "Come!" Come and see what we have! Come and see God!" And they knelt before the God in the box. One day, very long ago, the Spirit in the box turned the key from inside and she pushed it open. She looked around in the church and saw that there was nobody there! They had all gone. Not a soul was in the place. She said to herself, "I'm getting out!" The Spirit shot out of the box. She escaped and she has been sighted a few times since then. She was last seen with a bag lady in McDonald's.

William Easum, in a book called SACRED COWS MAKE GOURMET BURGERS (how about that for a title?!) observes that "almost every time people come in contact with the risen Christ or the Holy Spirit, chaos occurs and the church is moved out of its comfort zone." That's probably the best key to an authentic experience of the Holy Spirit, a genuine God experience, a true spirituality – there is some kind of disruption – and we are moved out of our comfort zone. We come to a new understanding – and far more importantly – a new way of living.

Second, what the Holy Spirit has produced – the Church – US! I know some of you think I'm kind of nuts about the importance of singing in church – especially for adults to be modeling that to pray at mass with the community – to sing at mass with the community – is critical. Our young people see right through us if we say being Catholic is important but then we don't even bother to pray with others at mass.

I had an uncle who had 8 children. He was always very kind to me, and seemed to be genuinely proud of the fact that I had become a priest. He had faithfully gone to church for years as he was raising his children, but he never sang or participated at mass, never got involved, and he forever was criticizing his pastor, the Pope, and just about everything that went on in his parish. He continually said "I'm not giving them any

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money until they get things straightened out over there.” Which meant that they had to do what he wanted when he wanted and how he wanted. And every time we were together, he lamented that he had been unable to pass the Catholic faith on to any of his children! It didn’t seem that surprising to me.

It’s the difference between church and spirituality. They are not the same. They are, however, commonly confused. “She goes to church every week,” we say, “she’s a very spiritual person.” Or we note that “He’s a staunch defender of orthodoxy. He’s a very spiritual man.” It’s an interesting conjunction of unlike ideas. It’s the equivalent of saying, “She’s an excellent vocalist. She’s been taking singing lessons for years.” There’s certainly a connection between taking voice lessons and becoming a professional vocalist, but it’s not a necessary one. The truth is that some people go to church all their lives and are not even nice persons!

Church or religion gives us the tools to be a Christian. Our spirituality is what we DO with those tools. A good test for whether or not we have a healthy spirituality is whether or not we are better people now than we were a year ago – 5 years ago – 10 years ago. If we are crabby, critical, mean-spirited – but coming to church every week – then we’re just punching tickets in coming to church – we’re having the experience but missing the meaning. We are spiritual if we are people who bring love, forgiveness, inclusivity, peace, compassion and grace to others and our world. Especially those that others would like to exclude.

True religion is expressed in love. It brings together; it does not divide. It includes, it does not judge. It forgives, it does not condemn. It is the glue – the grace – that holds the brokenness of the world together. The mystics of every religion are those who are looking for more than the security that rule-keepers get from being able to go through life keeping count of their virtues. Mystics absorb the spirit to which the rules are meant to lead us. They go beyond theology to immerse themselves in the REALITY that the rules are designed to prepare us to see – and the theology is meant to describe. They go beyond ritual to the REALITY to which the ritual points. They melt into God. They embrace the whole world, with all of its pain and brokenness. They make room for the poor, the alien, the marginalized because they recognize that they are Christ to us. They become the love that created the world and the compassion that sustains it. Spirituality is what takes us beyond religious practice to the purpose of religion: the awareness of the sacred in the midst of the mundane. (adapted from Joan Chittister, WELCOME TO THE WISDOM OF THE WORLD)

Finally, a word on the experience of the Spirit, on Pentecost. What happens to a person when the Holy Spirit descends upon them? We have a clue in our reading from the ACTS, where the Spirit came and what seemed empty was suddenly and surprisingly full. “The entire house in which they were” was filled with a noise like a driving wind, and those present “were all filled with the Holy Spirit.” When the Spirit arrives, fullness is the order of the day.

We all long to be filled. We all seek fulfillment. We hear this from any friend or family member who has been through a 12 step program. They all speak powerfully and with great conviction about the emptiness they had felt in life and how the pain of that emptiness had led them down many a wayward path in futile attempts to fill that hole. Each person had discovered that “you can never get enough of that which will not satisfy.”

But I suspect that we all know the gnaw of emptiness. We’ve all experienced the pain of being banished from our heavenly home, that we are not in a place of completion or fulfillment. And consequently, we keep trying to fill up our emptiness – which often leads us down wrong paths, trying, in the words of Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young “To get ourselves back to the garden.”

Left to our own devices, we are incapable of filling the hole that simply comes with being a finite human being with an infinite longing. So we can understand why the disciples felt so empty and afraid in that locked room. They had recently witnessed the brutal death of their spiritual master, the one who seemed to embody the remedy for all that they seemed to lack. Now He had gone and they felt lost, uncertain of what they'd recently been so sure of, and paralyzed with grief and fear.

What changed? Their fear fell away, the first casualty of Pentecost's outpouring of divine animating love. When they spoke, people heard and understood and were likewise moved. Their communication transcended limitations of language, culture and our human propensity to misunderstand one another. Spirit within spoke to spirit within the other. True connection was made. The reality that God's loving presence was at any moment making all things new came across clearly, and all who heard them comprehended. Despite language and culture differences, nothing got lost in transmission. Something universal was being communicated and a different kind of knowing was taking place, one that engaged the sense of sight and sound and taste "We were all made to drink of one Spirit," (1 Cor 12:13), of touch ("He breathed on them," Jn 20:22), and of imagination. This Spirit-filled communication effected profound change in all who heard, for the message was freedom from their emptiness of sin and a profound experience of the fullness of God's loving presence.

What happens when the Spirit comes into our lives? We receive gifts we never dreamed of. We might intuitively know how to handle a tough situation at work or at home. That's wisdom. We might stop our angry response toward another long enough to think what it's like to be in their shoes. That's understanding. We might find the words of hope that get to the heart of another's dilemma, and that's counsel.

I see many people in all walks of life who have the gumption to persevere in extraordinarily difficult times. They exemplify fortitude. Some realize that for every complex problem in the world there is a simple answer – and it's wrong! They are willing to dig deeper, exhibiting the gift of knowledge. In every church community we find some truly faithful souls whose bearing shows that they radically rely on God's help and accept all of life as a gift. They show true piety. And haven't we all felt awe – perhaps at the beach, when experiencing unexpected forgiveness, or in the presence of sheer beauty? In knowing awe, we've known the fear of the Lord.

They are known as the gifts of the Holy Spirit. They're all around us. And whenever the time is fulfilled, we will know them completely. (adapted from Tim McGrath, LIVING BY THE WORD, in CHRISTIAN CENTURY, Sunday, May 11, 2008, p. 20)

But let's make this very concrete. A lady named Peggy Piland, writing in GUIDEPOSTS, tells about an interesting event in her life. She had been planning to make a brown-sugar pound cake, her specialty, for her Sunday School Teacher, Mrs. Howell, who had been in her thoughts. But suddenly the idea to bake her a cheesecake popped into her mind – a lemon cheesecake, no less.

The recipe called for fresh lemons. Peggy checked her supplies. No lemons, but plenty of brown sugar. A pound cake would be so much easier, she thought. But again came the nudge. Bake a lemon cheesecake. After a trip to the grocery store to buy lemons, she began to make the batter. She cut a lemon in half, removed the seeds, squeezed the juice into the cream mixture and stirred.

When she arrived at Mrs. Howell's, Mrs. Howell's husband let Peggy in. "She'll be happy to see you," he said. Then he explained Mrs. Howell had broken her leg and was bedridden. "The doctor says she'll be fine. But she's just frustrated because she can't get around like she's used to."

Peggy walked in the bedroom carrying her surprise. "I'm so sorry about your leg, Mrs. Howell," she said. "Maybe this will help you feel better." As she placed the cake on the table, the tangy scent of fresh lemons wafted through the air. She looked at Mrs. Howell. Mrs. Howell was crying.

"How did you know?" she asked.

"Know? Know what?" asked Peggy.

"Today is our wedding anniversary," she said. "For the past 55 years I've baked my husband his favorite thing." She pointed at the cake. "How did you know it was lemon cheesecake?"

A simple little story. A little mysterious. Coincidence? Perhaps. But it's interesting how many little coincidences happen to those who yield themselves to the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Let the church say Amen. (DYNAMIC PREACHING, April-June 2007), author not specified...) And HAPPY BIRTHDAY, CHURCH!