

Dear Friends,

We toss around the word “spirit” quite a bit in church. It—or a related form—appears well over 600 times in *The Book of Common Prayer*, and on any given Sunday we all say, or sing, it perhaps a dozen times or more. And in the Postcommunion Prayer we give thanks to God for feeding us with “spiritual” food. This wording suggests that if we do not eat spiritual food, we spiritually starve. What is this spiritual food? What does spiritual hunger look like, and what are some of the signs of spiritual starvation?

**Psychology, Science, and the Spirit** The Greek word for spirit is *psyche* from which we get “psychology” and the various related words and practices. In this light, psychology is the science of the spirit, and a psychologist is one who seeks to restore us to spiritual health. My sense is that most psychology in our time is focused on mental or emotional health, and I wonder if that is quite the same thing as spiritual health. As a culture, we are much more comfortable talking about the intellect and the mind than we are about the spirit. Intellectual study is solid, and objective, and much of the time we pretend it is ideologically neutral. Spiritual pursuits are generally held to be vague, of marginal importance, not serious, and generally suspect. In many circles, to be considered an intellectual is high status; to be characterized as a spiritualist maybe not so much. I wonder if to address the health of the *psyche* primarily with the tools of science and the intellect is to mismatch the tools and the task. And perhaps to leave the *psyche* uncared for in any systematic way may not be a prudent strategy.

*Psyche* also means “breath,” and in Hebrew the equivalent word, *ruach*, connotes spirit, breath, and wind. And breath, wind, and the Spirit of God run through scripture from the beginning of creation when the Spirit of God moves over the face of the waters (Genesis 1:2) to the Spirit speaking in the final chapter of the Book of Revelation (22:17). Spirit and breath are closely related in our stories, in our concepts, and maybe even in our physiology. Words require breath to become spoken; breath without words has a very limited vocabulary. Saying something to someone is different from writing, emailing, texting or using some other non-breathing medium. The spirit gives a dimension to communication—to communion—which the content stripped of breath does not convey.

**Why are there no Pentecost Cards?** In our calendar, we are about to move into the Festival of the Spirit, the Feast of Pentecost. Normally in church we talk a fair amount about the first person of the Trinity, God the “Father.” For most people, when you say “God” [as in, “How could God do that?”], people are thinking of the first person of the Trinity. We also devote quite a lot of time, attention, and energy to Jesus, the second person of the Trinity. Although all three persons of the Trinity are present and active in both Christmas and Easter, our mental images for both festivals tend to feature Jesus more than the other two, probably because in the Incarnation, we have in Jesus something we can hold onto, at least until he tells us not to in the post-resurrection story recounted in John 20:17.

And I think Jesus tells Mary not to hold onto him at that point, and tells the Apostles that he is leaving them, because if he doesn’t leave, they will never realize that, with God’s help in the

presence of the continuing Spirit, the time has come for them to start taking responsibility for themselves.

**The Holy Spirit and Hosting Coffee Hour** In more local terms, it is tempting not to sign up to host coffee hour, teach Sunday School, or make a significant financial pledge to the church as long as we think this is someone else's responsibility, and they will cover all of these necessities if we don't. It is tempting to think that St. Elizabeth's is a prosperous, flourishing institution which somehow thrives on its own, and we can visit as we have the time and interest.

The Apostles come into their own when they realize that the mission is now up to them. We become mature members of St. Elizabeth's—at any age—when we recognize that continuing what drew us here in the first place is now up to us.

Our tradition at St. Elizabeth's is that we *each* step up to share in what it takes to make our community what it is. Everyone has an oar to pull; we do not divide ourselves between crew and passengers. This sense of community derives from our belief—and experience—that we learn, and shape our individual character as well as our community identity, by what we do. Children are properly cared for by adults, but from their earliest days, children who can take on appropriate responsibilities at home grow into a sense of responsibility, ownership, a healthy awareness of what they have to contribute. By sharing in the work of the household, they also develop a sense of the interdependence of everyone in the household, or the community, and the shared responsibility to create the manner of life which everyone seeks. Like the Apostles, we enter into spiritual growth maybe with some questions, maybe with anxiety, and maybe with mixed feelings, but we don't want to remain children all of our lives.

**Baby Food and Growing Up** Physically, the Apostles had long since grown up. Spiritually, they are just entering into adult life. In the season of Pentecost, God invites us to make that same developmental growth. God invites—challenges and calls—us to stop being children who try to live off of what Paul [1 Corinthians 3:2-3] calls spiritual baby food. To grow up, we have to start eating the spiritual food of adults, which involves complexity, ambiguity, tolerance of mystery, and the willingness to enter into parts of life trusting in God more than in our own abilities and certainties. The mysteries of the Spirit are summarized in the Spirit section of the creeds: the existence of a holy, catholic [by which we mean universal, not Roman] Church; the communion of saints—our active, lively fellowship with those who live with us and those who live with God; the forgiveness of sins—the belief that brokenness in ourselves, in our relationships, and in our world can actually be repaired and health restored; the resurrection of the body—that the limits of our observed physical life here are not the limits of our being; and the life everlasting—that life is more than being biologically active, but that there is a life, rooted in God and bestowed on us, into which we can enter now and in which we can persist for ever.

None of these contentions are obvious, simple, clear, or easy to understand. They are concepts for spiritual adults. As there are intellectual concepts beyond the grasp of children whose intellects have not fully developed, so there are spiritual concepts which one must be spiritually mature to appropriate. As with the intellect, some spiritual growth might happen simply by careful observation of, and reflection on, experience. But to achieve spiritual maturity, we need guidance, practice, review and feedback, teachers and mentors, and a fundamental commitment that achieving this growth matters enough to make it a priority.

**You've heard this at weddings** Paul famously makes a similar point later in that same Epistle: "When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways [1 Cor. 13:11]." Without spiritual maturity, we find ourselves facing adult problems—suffering and death, frustration and failure, disappointment and depression—equipped only with the spiritual skills of children. Like a child faced with a complex problem for which s/he has not been prepared, we are tempted to throw up our hands, say, "this is just stupid," and storm away. The fault is not in the moment, but in the absence of preparation before, so that the child could address the problem with confidence and skill.

As a culture—consider what we see in popular media—we often seem to be a population of intellectual geniuses and spiritual illiterates. A little more balance might stand us in good stead.

**Christmas in June** Pentecost—June 12<sup>th</sup> this year, "Flower Sunday" on our parish calendar—was originally a Jewish festival of the first harvest, coming 50 days after Passover. Pentecost is to the Spirit what Christmas is to Jesus—it is the festival which takes its meaning, for Christians, from the coming of the Spirit into the world in a different way than it had ever been before.

In Pentecost we acknowledge that to have full lives we need more than material sustenance. We need spiritual food as much as we need physical food. Spiritual food is the personal experience of not just the presence of God, but the personal, individual love of God directed to each of us. The bread and wine that we take, which symbolize and make our "communion" with God and one another, are gifts from God—we did not devise or invent this regular practice; it was given to us by God in Jesus.

**The Gifts of God for the People of God** These gifts are for all of the people of God, and we take them in **remembrance** that Christ died for each of us. To take the gifts without an awareness of what they represent is, in Paul's view, a highly dangerous practice. We might say that to think that we can be transformed and in good relationship with God just by going through the motions of taking a wafer and a bit of wine, without any corresponding commitment to be more faithful and Godly people in obedience to the specific will of God, is to be worse off than if we didn't come forward at all.

Taking the bread and wine is part of a larger process involving discernment, understanding, and will. The sacraments, in our understanding (see BCP, p. 316-317), do not function like medications which require only that they be consumed to be effective. The bread and the wine are holy, but they are not magic. Better to hang back honestly than to pretend to have a commitment or intention which we do not have.

**From Fast Food to Garbage** Without spiritual food, our spirits starve and we become creatures solely of the flesh. I think we seek to feed our spirits one way or another, and if we do not eat healthy spiritual food, we look elsewhere, just as a starving person might look in a dumpster for scraps because it was there and to eat garbage is better than to starve. If we do not feed ourselves healthy spiritual food, we will look first to the spiritual version of fast food, then to junk food, and then to garbage: we may be full, but we will not be well. Choosing our spiritual food, and our spiritual practices, wisely will determine our spiritual health. Diet and exercise....

And like physical health, spiritual health is a lifelong project. On the one hand, it is not just for children; on the other, it is not to be deferred until adulthood.

The Church exists to nurture and support those who seek sound spiritual growth. As we achieve maturity, we go forth into the world to manifest the presence of God by our works, large and small. Until we are mature ourselves, we are sending out children to do an adult's job, and the consequences of that strategy are rarely good for the children, the job, or the ones who send them.

This year at Pentecost, and throughout the year at each reference to the Spirit that you hear or read, every time you hear the invitation to communion or come forward to receive the spiritual food, think about what it means to grow in the Spirit, to become a Spiritual adult, and to be confident in the face of a spiritual challenge because you have been preparing for it all of your life. Then we can indeed go forth into the world in the name of Christ, to love and serve the Lord, rejoicing in the power of the Spirit.

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