

PEACE – SERENITY

I don't know how you began this Lent, but I hope you will end it contemplating "The Gifts of the Spirit." We *could* do even better than that. We could calm our souls, take a deep breath, and actually open ourselves to receive still more of what the Holy Spirit offers us. It is not about what we give up for Lent; it is about what we receive from the Holy Spirit of Jesus our Savior.

I am no Pollyanna, as most of you know. If we receive the gifts of the Spirit, that will change us more, in the long run, than anything or everything that we might ever give up. Nevertheless, Christianity is ultimately the claiming of LIFE – more life than we have ever had before, or thought was even possible before. "*I came that you might have life, and have it abundantly.*" (John 10:10)

I know that life is hard. Sometimes we get so focused on the problems, and what we think the solutions are, that we get to seeing little else. There is nothing terribly wrong with trying to solve our problems – unless that turns us negative and we end up seeing life as nothing *but* problems. It's not exactly a false picture. Life really *is* hard – we really do have trials and struggles. We really do need Jesus. We really do need to go into another week with encouragement, and to go on living our lives as faithfully as we can. We really do need to trust God for all the future that is beyond our sight or we'll begin to malfunction. So why would I complain about disciplines designed to help us with our problems?

I complain because, by itself, that picture is so watered-down and tame. I complain because the Christian Life is full of joy and confidence and power so far beyond all the normal descriptions that, even as they tell the truth, they lie. They don't mean to, surely. But do you remember the old expression: "To damn with faint praise"? It's from a poem:

*Should such a man, too fond to rule alone,
Bear, like the Turk, no brother near the throne,
View him with scornful, yet with jealous eyes,
And hate the arts that caused himself to rise;
Damn with faint praise, assent with civil leer,
And, without sneering, teach the rest to sneer;
Willing to wound, and yet afraid to strike,*

*Just hint a fault, and hesitate dislike.
Alike reserved to blame, or to commend
A timorous foe, and a suspicious friend.*

Alexander Pope (1688-1744)
Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot

I do not like watered-down Christendom. I long for a church that will rise above faint praise of our faith, and mere sneering at our doubts. I think Jesus deserves better than timorous foes and suspicious friends. And often, in *this* place, I think I have found such a church. But we will not be one for long if we get careless or go to sleep. Are the disciplines wearing thin? Is the commitment again taken lightly? Are the priorities slipping back into what's comfortable or convenient at the moment?

I do not believe that Christendom can run for very long off of guilt. I don't even think that we can be very faithful to Jesus – for very long, or very consistently – just because we need Him so much. Life is trouble, and there is no doubt about that. But many centuries of prophets preaching and priests absolving make it clear that we cannot rise very far above our SIN – *or* our sins – just because we are frightened, suffering, punished, or persuaded of our needs and shortcomings.

I don't think that John, the author of the Book of Revelation, meant to be so subtle, but most readers miss it. One of the major themes – so graphic that it's easy to get lost in the imagery – of the Book of Revelation is that no matter how harsh life gets, it does not bring people to true repentance. In the middle of the book, Revelation portrays nightmare plagues that make the plagues of Egypt look like child's play. These are not God's doing; they are the result of worshipping the BEAST – of putting faith in overt human power. The world gets torn asunder because people trust satanic promises and principles rather than turning to God. But no matter how bad and obvious the results, people won't repent – they won't turn back to God. Of course, John is setting it up for the LAMB OF GOD to come and lead people out of their suffering and despair. He comes riding in to offer grace and mercy and love – He comes to rescue and to save. Very few realize that this is the message of the Book of Revelation. Actually, very few know that this is the power of Christendom, period. We get focused on the problems, and try to invent our own solutions. Do you want to know what our culture thinks will save us? Watch any television commercial.

Do you wonder where I'm going with all this? We do face and try to deal with our problems. We put disciplines in place and try to get our own lives ordered so that we can be effective – do less harm and more good. Sometimes it even seems to work ... sort of ... for a while. Yet most of us realize that there are powers swirling all around us that are bigger than anything our personal approaches and disciplines can handle. But we try not to think about that very much. Denial has its uses.

In the midst of this reality – this potential chaos and ruin – Christians find LIFE and LIGHT and JOY. True Life is bigger than its problems, or there is no hope for any of us. Focusing on problems, and their solutions, can never bring us to Life. At best, that can only minimize the damage, which will inevitably overwhelm us – unless Life really is bigger than its problems. If we do not find and focus on LIGHT and LIFE, we are doomed to despair and darkness. For Christians, this comes to us in the LIGHT and LIFE of Christ.

Sometimes we ought to share our JOY. Sometimes we ought to talk about what really keeps us coming here – what really keeps us worshipping and praising God, and caring about each other. Sometimes we ought to forget about being coy or careful – about hedging our bets, or being afraid that people might think we're nuts or conceited or politically incorrect or whatever – and tell about what LIFE in Christ Jesus is really like for us. I mean behind the scenes: on the inside, where the world cannot see – where we truly live, and truly know HIM.

Do you ever wonder about the spread of the Christian church in, say, the first two centuries of its life? History cannot tell us about the inside, only about the outside. The outside was, quite frankly, unbelievable – impossible – at least by all normal, earthly expectations. So what must the inside have been like?

On the outside, a Message was being carried. It was carried by humble, mostly ordinary people. For the most part, they were not very rich. They had no outer authority. No government was supporting them. No religious institution was sponsoring them. And very quickly, they were persecuted, mocked, and defamed by ever-growing coalitions of religious, political, economic, military, and social structures of huge prominence and power in the overt world. In other words, the Christian Faith was spreading like wildfire, but in the most unlikely circumstances imaginable. Against the world's will. Against the "City Hall" that everybody thought you couldn't fight. Against the Roman Empire – and Roman steel.

We can laugh or sneer if we like, but it is pretty hard to deny that this was what happened – at least on the outside. It's very strange, at least from my perspective, that very few people even ask themselves what must have been going on on the inside. None of *us* ever do anything on the outside without some corresponding move on the inside. Does that not make us wonder about *them*? Especially when it turns out that a fairly significant number of these people – these people who heard and bought the Message – preferred ruination, persecution, torture, death ... to giving up the Message. Sometimes the streets were lined with their crosses. Sometimes they were merely ostracized, and couldn't find work to feed their families or give them any chance to make a place for themselves in their society.

What was the Message, that it could have so much power in their lives? Obviously it was more than outer words. It was more than mere theory, or creed, or ideas in the mind. That's the trouble with trying to talk about the spiritual realm, which cannot be seen by the outer world or contained in outer languages. But we *can* deduce a few things. It was personal and relational. For that much smoke, there had to be inner fire! It was personal and relational – and on the inside, the Message translated into some kind of deep, interior *experience*. This experience became more real to them, and more important to them, than anything going on in the external world. Anything!

What was the Message? That Jesus died? That He was crucified? Well, that was part of it. The story cannot be told or known apart from that. But that was going to inspire a grassroots movement of common, ordinary people to turn their lives upside down – risk everything they had ever known – to live a very different way that, at times, would get them beaten, fired, persecuted, tortured, killed? And they had wives, children, friends, relatives – just like we do – all of whom were at risk if *they* were at risk. There is no escaping it: They really meant it – this JOY that was more important to them than anything else in all the world.

What was the Message? That Jesus died? You can believe that if you want to. You won't convince me in a thousand years that this was what lit their souls afire and changed their lives. The way He died may encourage us not to let go of the Message no matter what, but that is not the same as the Message itself!

Now, I have to put this very quietly and lightly. You will hear it if you know the Message, no matter how I put it. And you won't hear it if you have not taken the Message inside yourself – again, no matter how I put it.

What these common, ordinary people were telling neighbors and friends all over the Near East at that time – what they had heard themselves – was this: This guy, Jesus, was sent from God. He is not dead – He is ALIVE! Our world killed Him, but death could not hold Him. If you want to know the truth of this for yourself, go into a lonely, quiet place where there are no distractions, and where there is no hurry. Then send your own soul's earnest probe into the quiet. Then say to the void: "I don't know if what they told me is true, but if You *are* alive – if You are really here and true – I invite You to come to me also. Take my life – guide it and direct it however You will." And then wait ... and see what happens.

The world keeps missing it because it's not on the outside – it's on the inside! Never mind the creeds, the theological explanations, or the organizations and institutions that grew up afterward. It was the experience on the inside that created "the church" and changed the world for those who opened themselves to it. To most of those who truly and sincerely invited Him, He came. What they *experienced* – not what somebody told them to believe, but *what they experienced* – changed them forever.

Now we are going to get further and further from what can be conveyed by human language. But they tried to talk about it anyway, so why shouldn't we? What people experienced was the coming of an interior Companion, who could not be seen or proved outwardly, but who nevertheless was more true and real to them than anything in the outer world. By the relationship they found with this Spirit Being, their lives were never the same again. They were never as lonely, never as frightened, never as angry, never as meaningless, never as discouraged as they had been before. And – wondrous to experience, and unlike any other hope or light in this world – it did not fade with threat, peril, or any of the trials of outer circumstances.

Like some of you, I have known a great many of these people over many years now, and in many different circumstances. I have seen them on their deathbeds. I have known them when they were jobless; when they were divorced; when their children had died; when their

mates had betrayed them; when they had lost all their money; when unscrupulous partners had delivered them unjustly to courts and ruined their lives. I have visited them in prison, and in psychiatric wards where they had been falsely committed by greedy relatives. I have visited them in hospitals and homes when disease would not be healed. The inner Companion does not always protect us from outer injustice or ruin, though I do think He always does if it won't break free will. But He will not break free will – not ours, and not anybody else's either. It would ruin the very purpose of our being here.

Nevertheless, it breaks our hearts when people we love go through such mayhem and injustice. And all of us do go through it, sooner or later, one way or another. But in all these circumstances, and many more, I have heard my Christian friends say, in whatever words they chose to use: “You know what? I still love you. I still love life. I still trust God. I still experience the love and light of Jesus with me – to comfort and to save. I'll see you in Heaven.”

Now shall we talk about the gifts of the Spirit? We do not make them up. We cannot get them for ourselves. But if we invite Jesus into our lives, Jesus brings these gifts with Him. The more we open ourselves to His presence and His influence, the more these gifts are given to us. It does us no good to pretend we have them. And we cannot buy them. Simon the Magician tried that, if you recall. (Acts 8:18) The gifts, like a kiss from the Spirit of our Risen Lord, come when we are ready and willing to receive them.

There are lots of gifts. This passage from Galatians is not a wooden list that defines or limits. But the passage gives us some quality hints. I cannot tell you about all the gifts of the Spirit. I don't know them all personally – not yet. I'm a slow study, even though an eager one, and I am still learning how to open myself to His love. But I do know a little about some of them, and I'd like to make just a few comments about one of them. It will not be an attempt to define. Each of these gifts is bigger than all definition. But if I talk about them, perhaps I can tempt you to make them the focus of your own prayers for the rest of this Lenten season. Even Jesus has to get our attention in order to bless us.

Consider the gift of “peace.” There is a lot that I do not know about peace. Do you understand how unnecessary, even foolish, it is for us to claim that we have fully grasped any one of the spiritual gifts? These gifts come from eternity. None of them are fully known here. We do not

define them; we *open ourselves* to them. Grasping and defining only take us back to the ways of the world.

On the other hand, we can be grateful – we can rejoice in the Spirit’s gifts. In fact, a major hope of this sermon is that you will claim them – that is, admit when you have received them, and talk about them more openly with each other. It is not a pride thing. It is a gratitude thing. And sometimes it’s important for us to tell each other – to let each other know – that whatever we may appear to be on the outside, on the inside we are very delighted with Jesus, and grateful beyond words for the LIFE He brings us.

I do know a little something about peace. This comment does not imply that *you* don’t know as much or more about it than I do. Just sharing what I do know, what I have experienced, what I am incredibly grateful to Jesus for bringing into my life.

Peace, like all of the spiritual gifts, is not connected to outer worldly circumstances. Sometimes it may have influence on us and therefore on the world we are participating in, but “peace” is not about harmony on the outside. If it were, it wouldn’t last for very long and it wouldn’t be worth very much. How long would it take Satan to use my wife to steal my peace, if it were something that fragile and tentative? And five minutes later, when maybe she needs me, what use will I be to her if my peace is gone? Sometimes we call that “a vicious circle.” Satan is very good at it. Yet I have been given the gift of peace over enough time, and in enough circumstances, that I know it is there if I claim it. I have only to turn inside, to where Jesus reigns – not my wife, or anybody else – and there it is, waiting for me.

Sorry, it doesn’t really translate into English, but some of you know very well what I mean. “Peace” in the New Testament is always about PEACE WITH GOD. It is never about peace in the outer world, though some people, even religious leaders, are always trying to take us there. Jesus reconciles us TO GOD; He takes away the animosity between us and God; He brings us peace by establishing the relationship between us and Himself, which then carries over into our relationship with His Father. That’s a small sample of the “theology” we figured out *after* having experienced it. Faith does not come from creeds – creeds come from faith. (A little secret the institutional church has yet to figure out.)

The AA word for “peace” is “serenity.” A synonym is “sobriety.” To an outsider, sobriety means you haven’t taken a drink recently. To an insider, sobriety is a quality of life, and it is wonderful in comparison to our drinking days. But it also gets better and richer the longer we live in the new and different way. I have heard people with twenty-five or thirty years of sobriety talking about working the twelve steps so they can have more sobriety in their lives. I have also watched newcomers, in their first year of sobriety, walk into a meeting, plop themselves down in a chair, and breathe a great sigh of relief. Outside they have lost everything: job, spouse, home, respect, reputation. But here in the meeting they have peace, serenity, sobriety. Here they belong, among people with whom they belong. Here they feel hope and light, because they have come to believe that a power greater than themselves can restore them to sanity – sooner or later, but inevitably. So the outer world looks pretty bleak. But inside they know they are better than they have been for as far back as they can remember, and so life will get better – in this world or the next. Some of them know they are dying. They did too much damage before they found the Way. Yet they rejoice anyway. How is that possible? Has it anything to do with any seeable circumstances or prospects? Hardly.

Have you been there? Not maybe with alcohol or the twelve steps, but have you been there? Peace is a gift beyond compare. And yes, I have been there, on both sides of this particular wire. In fact, even when things seem to be going pretty well on the outside, I never trust that. Life is fickle, and also temporal. You think I want to lose my peace? Start trusting stuff that has no worth or lasting importance? Thanks anyway; I prefer Jesus. Life with Jesus is wonderful.

I really love this church. I think we have some exciting possibilities and prospects if we keep praying and learning and growing together. But if we do not keep His presence – if we do not keep and trust our relationship with Jesus – none of it matters and none of it means a thing. Without the gifts of the Spirit, it will all come to naught. On the other hand, there are Mormons, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Seventh-Day Adventists, and Catholics who live under ludicrous authoritarian structures – who try to jam their minds into the straitjackets of horrible theological constructs (from my perspective, you understand) – but some of them, despite everything, find the presence of Jesus. Life with Jesus is wonderful. The Spirit of Jesus, our Risen Lord, gives gifts to all who find Him and invite Him into their lives.

Isn't that the pits? Many of them do so well, in spite of having such pitiful help and support from the systems they live in. And here we have such freedom and such latitude and encouragement to explore and discover and make it all our own, yet half the time we sit on our hands or get sidetracked, or we cannot even be bothered to show up. And sometimes we even forget to say thank you – we forget to give praise and glory to God.

Do we forget because we do not have the gifts? And if we do not have the gifts, is it because we have not invited Him in? And if we have not invited Him in, is it because nobody told us the Message? Or is it because we would rather run our lives our own way?

Please stop trying to turn it all into a thing for guilt or punishment. The punishment is not having Him in our lives. No other punishment could be as severe as that. Life with Jesus is wonderful. And His gifts are beyond compare.