Sunday, May 31, 1998
RECOGNIZING THE HOLY SPIRIT
Acts 2:1-4

Scholars who have studied the world's religions claim that the central question of religion has remained the same since the dawn of recorded history: How do we connect more profoundly with God? Morality, ethics, prayer, meditation, contemplation, ritual, and worship are all responses to this single question.

Yet, as we all know, a single question can get many different answers, which is why we have so many different religions on earth rather than one. At the same time, there are some common themes that are present in all religions. Philosophers such as Aldous Huxley and Huston Smith, who have intensely studied the world's religions, confirm this.

One of these major themes, which is common to most religions and which is central in the Christian faith and has its roots in its Jewish heritage, is the assumption that everything in the universe is the product of God's grace, which means that all of creation is essentially good, beautiful, orderly, and unified as opposed to ugly, bad, and chaotic. As it is written in the creation stories in Genesis, "And God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good."

This assumption about the underlying unity, harmony, and goodness at the center of creation is confirmed by mystical experiences of all kinds throughout history. It has also been established in another way — near-death experiences, which are another form of mystical experience.

In recent years, a number of books have been written which describe "near-death experiences." I think the best one of all these books has the title The Journey Home. The author is Phillip L. Berman, a Harvard-educated theologian and himself a survivor of a near-death experience.

Mr. Berman finds that all people who have had near-death experiences describe them in words something like this: "I felt a wholeness with the light; a sense that everything is right with me and the universe... God showed me that the universe in which we live is a beautiful and marvelous mystery that is connected together forever and always."

Berman said that he has not met a single person who has had a near-death experience who would disagree with this statement. To put it another way, mystical encounters, including near-death experiences, cause people to be more intensely aware of the Spirit of God that is within them and which permeates all of creation. In addition, they become aware of the unity and harmony in creation and its underlying goodness.

Physicists such as Einstein also worked with the assumption that there is an underlying unity and harmony in creation. Einstein was deeply mystical. He wrote, "The most beautiful and profound emotion we can experience is the sensation of the mystical. It is the sower of all true science. He to whom this emotion is a stranger, who can no longer wonder and stand in rapt awe, is as good as dead."

People who have had mystical experiences and/or near-death encounters report that their lives are filled with an inner peace which they ascribe to being more fully aware of God's Spirit and love enriching their lives.

On the other hand, people who are unaware of the fact that God resides in them and also beyond them tend to have lives that are characterized by inner restlessness, discontent, and a profound sense of loneliness. It also explains why so many people are terribly selfish, deeply materialistic, and occasionally downright destructive.

Having lost contact with God, the source of all love, people lose the grace to see things as they truly are, to see things through the eyes of unity and harmony. As such, they feel alienated from God, from each other, and the flow of life, much in the same way a newcomer occasionally feels alienated while standing alone at a party. While the newcomer may want to fully participate, he is not sure where to begin. He or she feels lost and left out.

The idea of being lost and left out is well expressed in the Christian concept of the "fall." Whenever we become lost and estranged from God and from each other, when we are no longer aware of that connection with the Divine, then our lives have an emptiness that we seek to fill, and this vacuum can be filled temporarily with all kinds of "false gods."

However, when we become aware of our divine connection, then whatever feelings of loneliness or homesickness we might have begin to vanish because of the realization of our attachment to God and to the whole of God's creation.

All of us are born with this connection to the Divine, but other things in life can cause us to ignore it or forget it. How then do we re-establish our connection with God, the source of divine love and harmony? How do we reawaken that awareness?

According to our Christian faith, there's nothing we have to do to earn this connection — it's already there. As I said earlier, we are born with it because we are created in the image of God. To help reconnect, the Gospels tell us that God came to us in a human being, in Jesus of Nazareth. Following his death and resurrection, God's Spirit remains with us.

In fact, God's Spirit, or that which we call the Holy Spirit, has been present within us and around us since the beginning of creation. The coming of Jesus was to make this Spirit more evident so that we could experience its full power. Even when Jesus was killed, the Easter event showed that no matter what we do, God's Holy Spirit remains active in the world and in us. People who have had mystical encounters, including "near-death" experiences, confirm this.

One person who had such a mystical adventure described it this way: "I was swept away with an immense feeling of joy and belonging... the walls that separated me from the world dissolved, and a great weight was lifted from my shoulders. Sensing the surge of life in everything around me, I knew for the first time in my life that I really did belong to the world and that everything was as it should be."

I believe this is what the disciples experienced at Pentecost when they had an overwhelming sense of the power of God's Spirit working in and among them. All the barriers that divided them from others were gone.

In temperament, nationality, language, culture, or social class, each person present on that Pentecost occasion was different from the others. But now, in spite of their differences, they experienced a new kind of relationship with each other and with God.

This does not mean they became a homogeneous, classless, or undifferentiated collection of people. They were, in fact, even more aware of their differences. What Pentecost did was to create out of this diverse gathering a new kind of harmony without destroying individual differences. They were free to be themselves in all of their individuality and potentiality and yet were drawn into a harmonious community with others that transcended their differences.

How then do we recognize God's Spirit or what we Christians like to call the Holy Spirit? What can we do to be more open to these mystical encounters with the spiritual? To begin with, we need to realize that we cannot control God's Spirit or that which we call the Holy Spirit. We cannot bend it to our will. We cannot conjure it up magically. Jesus said, "The Spirit is like the wind; it blows where it will."

It has been the experience of mystics through the ages that peak spiritual moments occur naturally, by grace. Openness to these moments is what is needed. Those who try too hard to make them happen face the danger of becoming self-absorbed rather than self-forgetful. Jesus said, "If you would find yourself, you must first lose yourself."

It's like any other journey. To truly experience the delight of the trip, we should not put all the emphasis on the destination. We need to relax and enjoy the trip along the way. And we can't be so intent on reaching our destination that we fail to stop along the way when necessary.

Someone put it this way: "Learning to relax into the mystery of life is an important aim on the journey home." And sometimes we have to stop to help the person with the flat tire on the roadside. We grow in our knowledge of God by performing virtuous acts. We love God by loving our neighbor. This kind of love helps us to recognize the Holy Spirit. That's the main point of the parable of the good Samaritan.

When we give ourselves to creation wholeheartedly, we naturally overcome self-centeredness and increase our sense of belonging to God. People who have had near-death experiences confirm this. One person described it this way:

"Anyone who has had such an experience of God... knows that there is only one truly significant work to do in life, and that is to love — to love nature, to love people, to love animals, to love creation itself, just because it is. To serve God's creation with a warm and loving hand of generosity and compassion — that is the only meaningful existence."

This recognition of the Holy Spirit and being aware of its power working in us is not some "other-worldly" existence. It is to live fully in life here and now. The more you realize your relatedness to God, God's creatures, and creation itself, the more you are fully alive.

An ancient mystic said it this way, "The glory of God is the human being fully alive." In other words, when we become fully alert and responsive to the many surprising gifts of everyday life, we are living spiritually.

Above all, remember this: even though I have talked about near-death experiences, you do not need to have one, and you do not have to have some other kind of life-changing mystical encounter in order to wake you up spiritually. Recognizing the Holy Spirit is about waking up to

everything. What could be simpler than that? The old railroad crossing signs put it very simply, “Stop, Look, and Listen.” Amen.