

YOU CAN'T STAY ON THE MOUNTAIN

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Last Sunday in Epiphany

While serving on Cape Cod I invited Dare Cox to lead a retreat on Celtic spirituality. Dare has served as spiritual director to bishops, clergy and lay people all over the country. She asked if we knew about thin places. Thin places are those places where the veil between this world and the next is very thin. Many of the people at the retreat named a place by the water. Wendy and I liked to walk on Nauset Beach in the evening, after the huge beach crowds had gone home. One night we got out there and the almost full moon was shining over the water. The light was so bright that we could see our shadows. The moon was in just the right spot and we just stood and watched for awhile. But the moment passed, fairly quickly for the reflection of the moon on the water needed the moon to be just the right height. With the waves softly breaking on the shore it was a moment of incredible beauty, a moment of one of those thin places. I still continue to find thin places and often they are by the water.

There are many places where the veil is thin between our world and what lies beyond. Moments when we get a glimpse of this are rare and in the Bible in particular they seem to often happen in the wilderness and especially on mountains. For many people and especially for people of the Bible, mountains were their thin places as with today's passage. Moses has several of these experiences and Jesus often went into the wilderness or up on a mountain to pray. We revel in them and like the disciples want to stay there. We would be happy to build our hut and just enjoy the moment for a long time, but the problem with experiences in thin places is that they do not last.

Peter, James and John are not allowed to stay up there in the glorious presence of God. As soon as Peter make plans to build a hut, God intervenes and the vision disappears in a cloud. That of course is always the problem with mountain top experiences. These experiences, by their nature and God's desire for us, are fleeting moments. We are given a glimpse and then expected to move on.

Several of the great mystics had just such an experience and spent the rest of their lives trying to get back to the mountain. Thomas Merton a Roman Catholic monk of the last century had intended to go to a monastery and spend the rest of his life as a solitary monk, but God had other things in mind for him. He found himself called after a period of time back into the world to spread the gospel and to share what he had experienced about the unity of all people. He was called to write and teach so that others might have the chance to share in that mountain top experience. His biography is entitled *The Seven Story Mountain*.

These revelations you see are not just meant for us, but for the world. There are appropriate times to go to the mountain or wherever your thin place is. One of my places is

at the Emery retreat house in Northern Massachusetts run by the Society of St. John the Evangelist. I try to plan an annual 5 day silent retreat where I can live in that monastic life, be still and listen for God. This recharges my spiritual battery for my work as a priest. And once in awhile I get one of those rare insights. Other times it is the opportunity to rest in the arms of God.

Our new bishop in his address to the council touched on this theme. We in this diocese like this parish are coming out of a time of searching. The diocese is coming out of a time of great struggle. During times like this we tend to look inward and operate in a maintenance role. Just trying to stay the way we are and support what exists. This however is not the sign of a healthy church. A healthy church has a balance of mission along with maintenance. Even one that has great worship, good music and great fellowship needs to look outside of itself. If we stay in this comfortable place basking in our “success” we will soon learn that this is a quick trip down hill as a congregation.

Bishop Hollerith has challenged our diocese to turn outward and look to our community to see how we can take our good news to new people. Our Presiding Bishop in her talk to the clergy at council spoke that we have to go out into the community and touch the lives of those who surround our building.

I remember a bishop who dressed the part of a street person and wandered the streets around her cathedral for a week. She asked people if she knew where she could get help. She asked if they knew of a church she could stop by for help and comfort. Even standing within the shadow of her cathedral she found that nobody pointed her in the direction of that cathedral. It was almost as if it didn't even exist. She then charged the dean of the cathedral and the rectors of all the downtown churches to reach out so that the community knew who they were and what they stood for. This revitalized several downtown congregations that were in decline. They realized that the people who needed them, did not necessarily look like or think exactly like them.

As I walk our dogs and talk to people in our Kings Grant neighborhood the ignorance of our wonderful parish is surprising. Many do know that we exist, but they do not know much about us. Very few know that we have a head start program, a program to distribute food or about any of our other outreach projects.

As is typical of churches coming out of a long search it takes awhile for the engines to spin up. For those jet pilots in the congregation you know what I mean. You push on the throttle and there is a little lag while the engine spins up to speed. I am trying to push on your throttle a little today and during the period of Lent. It is time for us to come off the mountain and get to work. We must turn our eyes outside the four walls of this nave. You know the importance. When this worship space was changed you consciously left the back window with clear glass. Why, because after the dismissal we walk out into the world. If we leave our Christianity sitting in the pews then we are missing the point of the great commission, the dismissal and the prayer after communion.

I made a conscious decision to change which of the two prayers we use. Several people have asked me why since the other one is the more comfortable one. Comfortable because of those seven deadly words, We have always done it this way. I use the second prayer because of the balance between maintenance and mission. Take a moment and look at this prayer on page 366

This prayer has two major components. The first is thanksgiving and assurance of God's presence with us and within us. This is the maintenance portion

Almighty and everliving God,
we thank you for feeding us with the spiritual food
of the most precious Body and Blood
of your Son our Savior Jesus Christ;
and for assuring us in these holy mysteries
that we are living members of the Body of your Son,
and heirs of your eternal kingdom.

This opening thanks God for what he has done through the gift of Christ. We are assured that we are living members of the trinity and heirs of the kingdom. We are saved by God's action.

Then there is the second part and why I use this prayer.

And now, Father, send us out
to do the work you have given us to do,
to love and serve you
as faithful witnesses of Christ our Lord.
To him, to you, and to the Holy Spirit,
be honor and glory, now and for ever. Amen.

This is along the lines of Eucharistic Prayer C that I mentioned a couple weeks ago where we are reminded that we come to the table for strength and not just solace and comfort. We come for renewal as well as pardon. It is about so much more than just us.

We are not just fed and assured of salvation, but then we are challenged to do something with this blessing. What we are challenged to do with this blessing is what I hope we can focus on during Lent.