

Gifts all around us: John 20:19-23; Acts 2:1-21; 1 Corinthians 12:3b-13

by [Tom McGrath](#) in the [May 6, 2008](#) issue

What happens to a person when the Holy Spirit suddenly descends like a tongue of fire? The first clue we have is in 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. I saw this plainly years ago when I was conducting a spiritual retreat for men who were members of various 12-step groups. They were all at different stages in their recovery. Each spoke powerfully and with great immediacy about the emptiness he had felt in his life and how the pain of that emptiness had led him down many a wayward path in futile attempts to fill that hole. Each man had discovered that “you can never get enough of that which will not satisfy.”

I suspect that every person knows the gnaw of that emptiness. We’ve all experienced the pain of being banished from our preternatural home, and may have spent much time and taken many a wrong turn, trying, in the words of the rock group Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young, “to get ourselves back to the garden.”

Left to our own wiles, we are incapable of filling the hole. Thus I 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 was gone and they felt lost, uncertain of what they’d recently been so sure of, and paralyzed by their grief and fear.

What changed? The various descriptions of what transpired remind me of how any bedazzled group might describe an event that caught them totally off guard. The descriptions are intense and metaphoric—and the details can be contradictory. But as in any such group recollection, the salient points tend to surface over time and find their place in the “official” retelling. As we read the different accounts of what happened at Pentecost, a clear picture begins to emerge. Once filled with the Holy

Spirit, the disciples urgently needed to share what had been made so crystal clear to them. The first thing they did upon receiving the Spirit? They spoke out—boldly. Their fear fell away, the first casualty of Pentecost’s outpouring of divine animating love.

There was something altogether different about the way the disciples proclaimed their newfound knowledge. When they spoke, people heard and understood and were likewise moved. Their communication transcended limitations of language, culture and the 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. In fact, those who listened to these exuberant Galileans were at first confused—not because they failed to understand, but because they did understand, and in their own language. Despite language and culture differences, nothing got lost in transmission. Something universal was being communicated and a different kind of knowing was taking place, an embodied knowing, one that engaged the senses 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,” John 20:22) and of imagination. This Spirit-filled communication effected profound change in all who heard, for the message was freedom from the 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 his or her 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 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 you’ll likely 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 you ever felt awe—perhaps in nature, when experiencing unexpected forgiveness, or in the presence of sheer beauty? In knowing awe you’ve known the fear of the Lord.

These are often known as the gifts of the Holy Spirit. They're all around us. And whenever the time is full, we will know them.

After an anxious night of worry, the apostles had an experience they struggled to describe. The Holy Spirit of God burst onto the scene, filling their scared and empty hearts so they might bring to the world the fruits of those gifts they'd just been given.