

I want to pick up on a phrase that St. Paul uses in that epistle to the Ephesians. He says this, "Be filled with the spirit."

But let me begin by sharing a horticultural tip. I picked this up from Julie Casten, our erstwhile church warden. She was kind enough when we were away one summer to water the plants in our garden. And she told me when we got back that she'd actually found it quite difficult to water the succulents.

I said, "really? Why's that?" She said, "Well, there's so much soil in the pots. You filled the pots too much, so that when it comes to watering them, there's no room for the water to go, and then the water just runs over the side." And she was right. And what's true of succulents is also true of us.

How can we be filled with the spirit if we're not empty to start with? How do we make room for God to fill us with his spirit? The lesson I learned from Julie isn't new. It forms the basis of the teaching of the third century desert fathers and mothers.

In that tradition, there's a famous story of a young man who goes out to see one of the fathers because he wants to be able to learn more about prayer and to be able to find God in his prayers. So the wise old man who he went to see said nothing when he arrived. He simply built a small fire and made tea. And he then began to pour the tea into the young man's cup. And he kept on pouring even when the cup was full. So it overflowed.

And the young man finally protested, "Stop," he said. "It's already too full. "So it is with you," said the wise old man. "Wait until you are empty. How can you receive until you seek?" The old man, like all the desert fathers and mothers had gone into the desert to find space. And the emptiness that the desert proved to be a good place to find space in the soul.

And they were following the example of Jesus when they did this. We can see in all the gospels

that Jesus himself regularly withdrew from those around him and sought out the wilderness. This is just a very typical verse from St. Mark. "Very early in the morning while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house, and went off to a solitary place where he prayed."

And there are verses like that throughout each of the gospels, before and after all the major events in Jesus' life, he went off to be silent and to pray. Whatever the demands placed upon him, Jesus always found a time and a place to be alone. His hectic teaching and ministering were constantly punctuated by times of withdrawal. This was where he found the strength to do his father's will. If we're to follow him, and walk his ways, we too need to find those moments to punctuate our life, to withdraw, and to be quiet.

Have you ever tried to read anything without punctuation? It's hard to make sense of it. There's a famous book called Eats, Shoots, and Leaves on the subject of the importance of punctuation, to make sense of our words.

And so it is with our lives. It's the punctuation of silence, and reflection, and solitude, which helps us make sense of our lives, and to stop it just being a constant stream of noise and activity. It's in the quiet, as we turn to God, that we empty ourselves.

We're all full of something, but it's not always what we want to be full of. We all suffer from the tyranny of distractions. I was talking to someone this week whose mind was full of conflicting thoughts, and she saw the need to sort through what she called the debris in her mind. We've all got too much debris in our hearts and minds. Or do Americans say debris? You know what I mean.

Sometimes all the junk that accumulates over the years needs to be cleared out by the Holy Spirit. The Quakers talk about the work of the Holy Spirit as the sifting silence. If we open ourselves up to the work of God in our lives, by his spirit, he can sift through the debris, and then fill us with his joy, and peace, and the gifts and fruit of his spirit.

When I was thinking about this, I was reminded of a very posh wedding I attended in London a few years ago. As a general rule in England, the posher the wedding, the less food there is at the reception. It's not uncommon to go to a wedding in a very smart hotel, with unbelievably expensive wine, and just a few hors d'oeuvre to nibble.

on Jesus, the living bread, which is the food of eternity.

Amen.

So, at this particular wedding, I made sure that I was near the kitchen door, because I'm very experienced in these occasions and that you need to be by the door to make sure you pick up on all the hors d'oeuvre as they come pass. If you're at the far side of the room, you could go away completely hungry. And I got it right and managed to stuff myself full of hors d'oeuvre. I don't know about you, but when I get up to double figures on fried shrimp, then I'm pretty full. And just as I was starting to feel full, to the point of queasiness, the best man stood up and said, "Ladies and gentlemen, dinner is now served." And the doors were opened, and we saw a magnificent spread before us. I missed out. I couldn't eat another thing. My stomach was already full.

Jesus invites everyone to his heavenly banquet. And our Communion service is a foretaste of what is to come. "Come, feast with me," God says. How many of us are ready for that? My fear is that too many people don't hear or answer that invitation because they've already filled themselves with spiritual junk food. There's no room to receive or respond to the invitation. It's got lost in the debris.

When we come to receive Communion in church, we have to come empty handed. And I think that's one of the reasons I find it so humbling to administer the Host at Communion. None of us come to the rail, holding our wallet, or our phone, or anything. If we did, where could we put the bread? We need to come before God empty handed and empty hearted.

May our empty hands be a sign of our desire to be filled with God's Spirit. If we provide the spiritual hunger, God provides the spiritual food. We feast