

“Anything’s Possible With God’s Spirit.”

Richard Stilwell of Concord, Massachusetts was working underneath the family car, a full-sized van that weighed nearly two tons. Something went wrong, and suddenly Richard was pinned to the driveway. His wife, Donna, saw what had happened and, bringing to bear every resource common to the average 5'-2" 110-pound woman, lifted the van just enough for Richard to roll to safety.

It’s a familiar enough story, and we’ve all heard some version of it, so we might be tempted to dismiss such stories altogether. But on the Day of Pentecost, we’re encouraged to pay attention to such stories, because they remind us that there is more to life, and especially more to us, than meets the eye.

Now, non-religious folk will often look at the world and see only what’s at the surface-level of things. And for them, the temptation would be to take the story of Richard and Donna Stilwell and discount it altogether because, on the surface, there are all sorts of things that a 5'-2" 110-pound woman shouldn’t reasonable be able to do.

But religious folk can look at the world and — in addition to what everybody else can see — see more. Because our faith allows us to see levels of meaning, and complexity, and power, that other folks just don’t see. Or don’t want to see. And on a good day, we can see that the world is overflowing with the presence of God, and therefore rich with possibilities that others, who don’t have the eyes to see them, couldn’t possibly understand or appreciate.

In two of our Bible readings this morning, we heard about the Holy Spirit at work in the lives of a number of people. It would be natural to ask, “What happens to a person, when the Holy Spirit suddenly becomes a reality in their life?” Let’s look at what happened in the reading from Acts:

When the day of Pentecost had come, the disciples were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind and it filled

the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

What happens when the Holy Spirit shows up? Apparently, things, or people, which were empty, are suddenly, and surprisingly, filled.

Probably everyone here has gone through periods of feeling empty, and longing to be filled. One man saw this plainly, when he was conducting a spiritual retreat for men who were members of various 12-step groups. Describing those men, he wrote:

They were all at different stages in their recovery. [But 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. [And each] man had discovered that “you can never get enough of that which will not satisfy.”

I think we can all resonate with that. And so, we can understand, when they felt so empty and afraid, why the disciples decided to lock themselves in a room. After all, they recently witnessed the brutal death of their rabbi, the one man who seemed to be the answer to all their needs. But now he was gone, and they were beginning to doubt the very things that seemed so sure only a few days earlier. And that doubt, combined with their grief and fear, paralyzed them.

But when the Holy Spirit filled their emptiness, which we heard about in our gospel reading, something changed in them. And, all of a sudden, the disciples felt an urgent need to share, not only what had happened to them, but also to share the certainty that had returned to their lives. And so they spoke out.

But what's really interesting is not just the fact that they spoke, but also the fact that they were able to speak effectively. Men who were fairly uneducated, with no training in public speaking, were suddenly able to communicate in a way that got past the barriers of language and culture. And they were able to talk about how

God was making all things new. And everyone who heard them, understood what they were saying, and lives were changed in profound ways.

Now, having said all this, I think a second question comes to mind, when we hear the story of what happened to those disciples. And that question is: “What happens when the Spirit comes into our lives?” Well, the short answer is: “We receive gifts we never dreamed of.” For example:

Was there ever a time when you, intuitively, knew how to handle a tough situation at work or at home? That’s the gift of wisdom.

Was there ever a time when you were able to refrain from responding in anger to another person, long enough to think about what it’s like to be in his or her shoes? That’s the gift of understanding.

Was there ever a time when, seemingly out of nowhere, you found that you had the words of hope that got to the heart of another person’s dilemma? That’s the gift of counsel.

Did you ever know someone who had the gumption to persevere in difficult times? They had the gift of fortitude.

Did you ever know someone who seemed to understand that complex problems weren’t always solved with simple solutions, and was willing to dig deeper and longer? They had the gift of knowledge.

These gifts, and others like them, are from the Holy Spirit, and they’re all around us. And whenever the time is right, or whenever the need is felt, we will experience them.

Which brings me back to Donna Stilwell of Concord, Massachusetts. We are all, in some ways, just like she discovered herself to be. There she was, walking around just like anyone else, and yet she had within herself gifts she never imagined. Never in a million years would she have thought that, if the need ever arose, she

would be able to lift a two-ton van. And I'm sure that, looking back on that event, she still has a hard time believing that it was actually her.

And, I suspect, that many of those disciples, after spending the remainder of their lives telling their story, and planting new congregations wherever they traveled, had a lot of time during their years of retirement to wonder, "Was that really me? How in the world did I manage to do all that?"

The Day of Pentecost reminds us that our lives are full of possibility and hope. And it tells us that, one day, and with the help of God's Holy Spirit, we might live to see ourselves doing things we never imagined possible. Because, thanks be to God, the Day of Pentecost reminds us that there really is more to us than meets the eye.