

MY SPIRITUAL JOURNEY
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At the outset of this four part series and at the beginning of my particular presentation, I want to acknowledge how awkward and impossible this whole endeavor is! To convey to you the mystery of my walk with God is like trying to describe the essence of the love I carry for my wife and my children, or to capture in words the beauty of a summer sunset or of an uplifting work of art. A great deal is lost in translation!

But given Jesus' enjoinder that we should let our light so shine that others may see divine grace and glorify God, I will do my best to articulate for you (and for myself) how I have personally experienced God's dynamic presence and grace at work. In doing so, I have no illusions that somehow God is more active in my life than in others. My hope is that my reflections will assist you in discerning where God's Spirit may be calling and stretching and nurturing you. Although the four of us who have agreed to lead this series are ordained clergy, please do not think that we have some monopoly on God's attention. It is just that by training and perhaps by temperament we are equipped and inclined to pay attention to the spiritual dimension of our lives. But all of you could and no doubt already do have equally compelling stories to tell, and I hope moving forward that we can provide venues and opportunities for you to do that.

I suppose I should start this narrative by saying that I was born into a devout Roman Catholic family in California in 1944. Although we moved every three years or so because my father was with the U.S. Forest Service, the constant was our church involvement. We participated fully in our small Catholic parishes (Sunday services, Lenten weekday services, catechism classes, acolyting – my mother was volunteer organist and my father counted the collection each week), and we prayed the family rosary regularly at home, each of us charged with leading one of the decades. I was the middle of three children, including an older brother and a younger sister. The closeness of my immediate family, including faithful and loving parents, and the openly practiced faith of my extended family, including priests and nuns among my relatives, nurtured and called forth my faith in a God who was dependable and concerned for our well being and who asked us to be accountable.

By high school we had moved to Missoula, Montana, a town large enough to have a small Jesuit school, which I attended. My very positive experience there with the young dynamic Jesuit teachers led me to two years of college at Seattle University (also Jesuit) and then joining the Jesuits in 1964 at the tender age of 20. The next 14 years strongly imprinted within me Ignatian Spirituality. Ignatius of Loyola was a spiritual giant and the founder of the Jesuits in the 16th century. I would characterize his spirituality as having a central focus both on discernment of God's will, i.e. a continual search for what God wants, as well as a commitment to living it out. My first exposure to those motivating principles came early in the training in a silent thirty-day retreat following *The Spiritual Exercises*, Ignatius' gift to the Church from 400 years earlier. His writing down of his experiences in a systematic way served thereafter as the catalyst and blueprint for the retreat movement. My retreat was within the context of an intense two-year novitiate, which we affectionately called "spiritual boot camp." The *Spiritual Exercises* in

particular served as a powerful conversion experience for me and built on my childhood faith, compelling me to offer myself in service to this God whose love was so overwhelming and active and powerful. Life, it became clear and ingrained within me, was a gift from this generous God, to be spent discerning and living out God's will. Through my formative years of study in Philosophy at Gonzaga University, of teaching for three years at my old high school, of studying Theology for four years in Toronto, I was being schooled deeply in this Ignatian approach. Despite some concerns about my capacity for a celibate life, I strongly desired to serve God and God's people as a priest and was ordained in 1975.

There was a wonderful newfound freedom and vitality in serving as a priest. I could now preach, celebrate, anoint, absolve, and minister to people in life-giving ways that I had been training for so long to do. A year of parish work in Toronto and then two years of campus ministry back at Seattle University were exciting and fulfilling. I not only felt challenged and fulfilled in priestly work, but I also regarded it as significant lifetime work and as living out of a divine call to serve God and serve others.

There was the continuing nagging issue of celibacy, however. I realized I had accepted celibacy as "a necessary evil" in order to be ordained, but I had begun to realize that I must freely and positively choose it or give up the priesthood. Meeting Betsy Elkins in 1977 made that choice very real. She had come west to do several years of volunteer service, including one in Seattle, where we met. I could not ignore a deep sense of peace stemming from our friendship, unlike any that I had ever experienced before. I was at a crossroads. Despite the daunting prospect of having to leave priestly ministry and find my way in the world along some other path, I decided to do a year of discernment and seek God's possible changing purpose for me. I met monthly with a spiritual director and weekly with my small community of fellow Jesuit priests, who cooked for each other, shared household chores, and met each Sunday evening to share significant developments in our lives.

As providence would have it, toward the end of that rather intense year (now over thirty years ago), I was asked to co-lead a five week pilgrimage to Israel of priests and nuns on sabbatical. During a week of silent retreat at the Mount of Beatitudes, I was praying at the shore of the Sea of Galilee. By that time, I realized that what I most wanted was to marry Betsy, but I was not at all sure that God wanted the same thing. Realizing that I could not live my life afraid to face that possibility, I finally was able to put aside all my own desires and preconceived notions and ask God honestly and with no reservations, "What do you want?" In a sudden Paul-on-the-road-to-Damascus flash of visual understanding (I don't know how else to describe it), I was sensibly overwhelmed with God's love and astonishingly instantly clear and at peace about God's gift to me of Betsy and of God's not only tolerating but actually calling me to marry her. Major burdens that I had been experiencing around this decision of guilt, and of fear of what I would do in the future to make a living, and of concern for what others might think were completely burned away – in an instant. Ignatian discernment principles attribute such undeniable fruits of the Spirit to God's leading. I was – and have been ever since – completely sure and at peace with this decision. I consider that completely unmerited grace the greatest gift of my life.

After returning to Seattle in June (1978), I went through the resignation process with the Jesuits, which coincided with the end of Betsy's volunteer service. We decided to get married in six months at her parents' church in Durham, Epworth Methodist, and began to look for employment. Answering a providential Sunday newspaper want ad, we were hired as half-time co-youth ministers at St. Stephen's Episcopal Church, a parish and a denomination, where we soon found a spiritual home. Betsy as Methodist and I as Roman Catholic found it both a wonderful meeting place of our individual heritages and a life-giving community for our new life together.

Our combined salary was \$500 a month! Fortunately, when the assistant at St. Stephen's moved on, I was hired to fulltime and licensed to preach by the bishop. After two years, and once I worked through my Catholic guilt and loyalty(!), we both joined the Episcopal Church and I applied to be received as an Episcopal priest. Fortunately, since we were scraping by paycheck to paycheck, the diocese did not make me do further theological training. After two more years of interviews and process requirements, they accepted my Jesuit education, my four years of on-the-job training on a parish staff under (as it worked out) three different rectors, and my intentional diocesan involvement. Fittingly on the feast of Augustine of Canterbury (May 26, 1982), the bishop received me as an Episcopal priest. The life I thought I had given up was freely given back to me in a slightly different form. A few days later, on Pentecost Sunday, I once again celebrated Eucharist, after a hiatus of four years, and I baptized our son, Tyler, then seven months old. New life was gratifyingly abounding.

Nor did it end there! With the birth of our first child and after five years in Seattle, Betsy was ready to return to North Carolina. I had no idea how that might happen in the Episcopal Church; and without any personal connections at all in the South, I was not very hopeful. But a computer printout from the Clergy Deployment Office alerted me to a need for an associate at the Chapel of the Cross in Chapel Hill. "Is that anywhere near Durham?" I asked Betsy. She replied, "You call that rector right away!" It turned out to be a man named Peter James Lee, who was searching for two associates at once. In fact, he had just called two people to fill the positions, and they had both turned him down! What a providential time to call! As it happened, he not only knew the rector who had hired me, but my then-present rector's father was the bishop who had ordained Peter! I began to feel that this search was out of my hands. Since we were flying out here for vacation within a few weeks, we established an interview time. After a few hours of conversation, Peter hired me to be his Associate for Parish Ministry, beginning that fall of 1982. We returned to Seattle and shared the bittersweet news with the people of St. Stephen's, thanked them profusely for giving us our new start, and moved east. The Elkins family was reunited, and I was privileged to begin a whole new learning experience in Episcopal parish life and ministry.

And what a formation it was! I began to adjust to my new identity as an Episcopal priest and to acclimatize to Southern culture, and suddenly after only a year and a half of on the job training, Peter Lee was elected Bishop Coadjutor of the Diocese of Virginia. After thirteen years of a very strong ministry here, he moved north. Dr. Pfaff was made interim priest-in-charge, and three of us formed the fulltime clergy team during the search. I thought that after a new rector was hired, we would all move on, as was the custom; so I began to look around for new employment. When the Search Committee

asked me to let my name be considered, I agreed. The appeal of this parish, the prospect of raising our sons in Chapel Hill (Peter was happily born during the interim), and staying close to Betsy's parents in Durham, made this position very desirable. But having only served as an Episcopal priest for about two years did not seem like near enough experience, and I had serious doubts about whether God was calling me to this major responsibility.

As the process moved forward and I kept making the cuts from 100 applications down to 50 to submit further materials, down to 15 to be visited on site, then down to 7 to come for interviews, and finally down to 3 names submitted to the Vestry for further interviews and a final vote, I began to pray more and more about this possible vocational call. One memorable vacation day at Emerald Isle, I took a long walk down the beach, praying about my doubts as to whether I was ready for this daunting challenge. It was not as overwhelming a prayer experience as at the Sea of Galilee, but it was a great gift just the same. When I left on the walk, I was very unsure. When I returned, I was at complete peace that God's grace would be enough for whatever challenges would arise and that surprisingly God was indeed probably calling me to this new responsibility. The Vestry, of course as you know, did subsequently take a chance and elect me, and it has been a great privilege to serve as the Rector of this unique parish for now over 23 years. It has been an extraordinary experience, if not always smooth and painless, but always life-giving, at least for me, and I hope, for the parish and the community.

The mandatory retirement age in the Episcopal Church is 72, which allows me another possible 7½ years here, most or all of which I hope to take advantage of. So perhaps a later date is a better time for a retrospective. You certainly have enough to digest for now!

I will just add a postscript about one more significant time of discernment during my years here. It involved the search for a new bishop for our diocese in 1999-2000. I was certainly torn between wanting to continue here at the Chapel of the Cross and feeling a strong call to be part of the diocesan search. In all of what became a very complicated, "twisty-turny" process, the strongest conviction I received was that I should be part of the process. I never came to the quiet sure realization that God was indeed calling me to be bishop. And, as you know, I was not elected by convention, an outcome that brought both relief and disappointment. But it was an invigorating and life-giving process for me, envisioning future ministry and having to articulate my views on various issues for roomfuls of people and listening to other's people's hopes and dreams for the Church. I have never regretted responding to that call to be part of the process, and I think it was healthy not only for me, but for the diocese. My hindsight (and perhaps self-serving analysis) says that if I had not been there on the slate taking away votes from another white, middle-aged candidate, Michael Curry would never have been elected the first and still only African-American Episcopal diocesan bishop in the South. And in my view, that would have been a great loss to the diocese and to the Church.

So there you have it – a quite unlikely story. Who would ever believe that a white, Catholic kid from Montana who became a Jesuit would end up the Rector of a major Episcopal parish in North Carolina, a husband and father of two sons, and a significant factor in helping to elect the first black diocesan bishop in the South?

With God all things are possible!