

Spirituality.

There's a word you hear tossed around in church a lot -
and in other places, too.

What does it mean? Spirituality?

The simplest definition of spirituality is this:

the art or the practice of being present to God.

Of course, all things are present to God - all of the time!

The question here is whether or not we live in *awareness*
of the presence of God around us.

We can get at this by asking some simple questions:

How do I live my life - conscious of the presence of God?

How do I make choices and decisions - in the presence of God?

How do I earn my living - in the presence of God?

How do I choose my friends or exclude others - in the presence of God?

How do I live my marriage, or how do I live my divorce -
in the presence of God?

How do I live with my secrets - in the presence of God?

How do I raise my children - in the presence of God?

Yesterday was one of the three or four days each month
when I am the Catholic priest on call at Emerson Hospital.

Early this morning I was paged to the hospital
to come and pray with the family of a woman from Westford
who had just died.

Her name was Tammy and she was the mother of 7 children.

Her oldest is 18 and her youngest is one month old.

Her death was as sudden and unexpected as it was tragic.

How does Tammy's family live through this loss, this suffering
- in the presence of God?

What spirituality will sustain them in the days, months, years ahead?

Genuine spirituality helps us to *live through and survive* pain and suffering.

Spirituality does not cure pain;

it neither dis-solves nor re-solves it.

Spirituality is the art, the practice of *living with and surviving*
the suffering that is part of every life.

And "Suffering is the painful consciousness of that within our world
which is not what we expect it to be."

(Nathan Kollar, *Songs of Suffering* (Minneapolis, MN: Winston, 1982), p. 81.)

We do not expect the loving mother of a large family
to die so young and so suddenly

and so Tammy's family suffers in pain today,
and even as I tell their story, I know it touches me and you,

touches our own pain and suffering, whatever that might be...
I know that hearing that story may bring back to our own consciousness
"that within our lives which was not what we expected."

In the gospel today Jesus speaks of the poor, the hungry, the grieving,
and of those who are hated, denounced, insulted and excluded.
And he calls them *blessed, rich, satisfied, joyful and rewarded*.
Is Jesus crazy here? Does he just not get it? - No.

What Jesus speaks here is wisdom, and he "gets it" very much.
He is speaking about life, and its pain and suffering -
lived and survived *in the presence of God*.
It can be very tempting, in our pain, to think, even to believe that
"If there really was a God, then this suffering wouldn't be here..."
"If there really was a God, Tammy wouldn't have died..."
That's the part of us that wants to scream in God's face,
or turn away from it altogether,
so heavy are our burdens, so deep our pain.
And screaming in the face of God is very often a good thing to do
because in doing so we bare our hearts before God.
And when we do this, Jesus,
the One before whom we bare our hearts
bares his heart to us, as he did on the Cross...
and he says, "I know... I suffer with you..."

Jesus, who was innocent and pure, suffered for us,
and he did his suffering *in the presence of God*
and he, too, cried out in his Father's face,
"Father, if this cup of suffering can pass me by, let it go..."
and even from the cross,
"Father, why have you abandoned me?"

Were *this* life all we had,
Jesus *would* be crazy and we would be fools without hope.
Remember what we just heard from St. Paul:
"If for this life only we have hoped in Christ,
then we are the most pitiable of people..."
But those who live their lives, and suffer their pain
- in the presence of God -
understand, and know, and see already
that in the presence of God,
even the deepest of our sufferings
and the worst of our woes have been redeemed
and while we may carry our pain for a long time
and be reminded of it, even after healing,
by the scars that suffering leaves behind,
still, we can be like the tree in today's first reading:
the tree planted beside the waters,

stretching out its roots to the stream;
the tree that does not fear the heat when it comes,
whose leaves stay green,
the tree that even in the drought of suffering,
still bears fruit.

I speak words of faith, here
and I speak to people of faith.
Apart from faith, my words would be utter foolishness.

And even if pain has reduced *your* faith
to something as small as a mustard seed,
let the Lord bring that seed to root, to growth, to life and to a new harvest.

We gather at the Lord's table in the shadow of *his* suffering.
He left us this meal to nourish us in our pain
that we might take on his strength and be healed.
May the body and blood of his suffering
be our hope and healing in the sacrament of this altar.

- *Rev. Austin Fleming*