

The Vintage Voice

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Magical Mystery Tour

The Rev. David K. Fly

My friend Tom Woodward, a retired priest, told me this story of a Methodist minister who did occasional radio programs in the small Missouri town where Tom once was rector of the local parish. Some of you may remember when stations put aside fifteen minutes a day for what they called “religious programming.” The quality of those programs was, to be kind, mixed.

However, there was one exception: the local Methodist minister. People would actually call their neighbors to remind them that he was scheduled to do the show. His approach, unlike the usual hellfire and brimstone of most of the preachers, was to play a popular song, one that listeners had been hearing for months, and build his meditation around the lyrics. Tom taped a few of the Methodist minister’s programs, and I had the opportunity to hear one of them. After playing the Beatles singing “Magical Mystery Tour,” he began simply with, “We’re all on it you know. We’re all on a magical mystery tour.”

I thought of all the folks listening who were, in the words of Walker Percy, struggling with the “everydayness” of their lives. And here was this guy speaking of the magic and mystery of existence. He seemed to say, “Your life, regardless of how insignificant you may think, is a gift, and because it is a gift, it has meaning and purpose. Your life and all that it holds can become a gift back to God, and God will treasure that gift for all eternity.”

I’ve often thought of the ministry we’ve been blessed to share as a magical mystery tour. Over forty years ago, on the eve of my graduation from seminary, I got the jitters. Was I doing something God wanted me to do? How would I know? When would I know? I took my questions to my liturgics professor, Tom Talley. “How often do you know that the Holy Spirit is working in your life?” I asked. Father Talley was quiet for a moment. Then he smiled and said, “Oh, I figure about every ten years.”

I was stunned. This wasn’t the answer I had been looking for.

“About every ten years, you have a chance to look back on your life and, when you do, you can see the ways the Spirit has touched you, moved you, maybe even shoved you in certain directions. And the Spirit of God is there in the least likely of places, in the least likely of people, in everyone you’ve known and loved. And the Spirit has touched you through all of them. You’ll be able to say, ‘There’s the Spirit,’ and ‘Oh, look, there’s the Spirit again!’ What you know in the present is that you have to make decisions, you have to answer the questions your life and ministry bring you. Later, as you begin to reflect, you’ll begin to understand that if the Spirit was there with you in the past, the Spirit is with you now, and will be with you as you move into the future. If you want to know how the Spirit is working in your life, just look in the rearview mirror every once in a while.”

Well, I've had over four decades now to look back, and I've seen the Spirit in my life and the lives of those with whom I lived and worked in campus and parish ministry. Looking back, I understand these words of Elizabeth Barrett Browning:

Earth's crammed with heaven
And every common bush afire with God;
But only he who sees takes off his shoes,
The rest sit round it, and pluck blackberries,
And daub their faces unawares.

Among the joys of ministry are those marvelous moments when we know we are standing on holy ground. I put that to the test in 1998 when I took early retirement. Could I retire and embark upon a new understanding of ministry, or would it be the end? Ten years ago my wife and I began working for the Pension Fund doing Planning for Tomorrow Conferences. In our pre-retirement workshops, I find many clergy who are asking the same question. A few years ago, the Fund began Enriching Your Retirement conferences for already retired clergy and spouses. I discovered as I talked with them that they, like me, had come to appreciate the words of that Methodist minister who said, "We're all on it, you know. We're all on a magical mystery tour." It never ends!

When I was a college chaplain in Minnesota in the early seventies, I went to the snack bar one day for a cup of coffee. Because the place was crowded, I ended up sitting with a young woman I had never met. She was reading a textbook. Suddenly, she slammed it shut and said, "Statistics! That's all they are. I'm taking a course in which people have been reduced to statistics. They're not human beings anymore. All the mystery is gone, all the beauty. I'm being trained to treat people as if they were numbers on a page, and I'm afraid that when I leave this place, I'll do just that!" She rose to leave. Her parting words were, "You know, I think I'll go someplace and start a Society for the Preservation of Amazement!"

She got away before I had the chance to tell her that such a society already exists. It's called the Church. Isn't it amazing that God has been present in our lives since we were children? Isn't it amazing that God has touched us through the lives of those to whom we have been called to minister — even when we least expected it? Isn't it amazing that God has used us and continues to use us to touch the lives of others?

A magical mystery tour? You bet!



The Rev. David K. Fly retired in 1998 from Grace Church, Kirkwood, Missouri, after thirty-three years in ministry. He and his wife, Adrienne, have been consultants to the Church Pension Fund since 2000. His memoir, *Faces of Faith — Reflections in a Rearview Mirror*, was published by Church Publishing, Inc.