

Radical reliance: Acts 2:1-21; Romans 8:22-27; John 15:26-27, 16:4b-15

by [Rob Merola](#) in the [May 30, 2006](#) issue

On the first day of my vacation, I went fly fishing on the Yellowstone River in Montana and caught nothing but a couple of branches. That might have been because I didn't have a clue as to what I was doing. I didn't know whether to use flies that float (dry flies) or flies that sink (wet flies). I didn't know how I should work them in the water. Should I just let them drift with the current, or use a fast or slow retrieve? I didn't know which areas of the river would be most productive in terms of holding actively feeding fish. Did I mention that it had been 20 years since the last time I was fly fishing?

The next day, that all changed when a good friend took me fishing. He had a boat, so we could cover a lot more water. He showed me what flies to use and how to present them. He showed me exactly where to cast. And guess what? I caught several very nice trout, including a couple that were over 20 inches long and weighed several pounds.

I could not have caught those fish without the help of my friend. I needed a boat, the proper flies and the necessary knowledge of how and where to fish this particular river. My friend had all these things, and in sharing them freely he made it possible for me to do something I could not do on my own.

In each of this Sunday's lectionary readings, I am struck by how the Holy Spirit makes it possible for people to do things they could not do on their own.

In Acts, the Spirit empowers the disciples to speak in languages they had never learned and gives them a boldness to do so publicly—a boldness that up to this point they had not had. In Romans, the Spirit helps believers pray in ways that they could not pray on their own. And in John, Jesus says the Spirit will guide the disciples into all truth—truth that they “could not bear” without the Spirit's help. The Holy Spirit will reveal things to the disciples they could not discern on their own, and then give them the strength to live that truth accordingly.

In other words, God has both knowledge and resources that we don't have. And in sharing these things freely with us, God makes it possible for us to do what we

cannot do alone. This sounds simple, but it raises the question: What are we doing in our lives and in our churches that takes us beyond what we could do in our own natural capacities? Asked another way, where in our lives and our churches is the supernatural unmistakably evident?

Many churches put considerable emphasis on leadership development. Corporate business practices are viewed as models to be emulated. Certainly there are positives in this. Taking the gift of leadership seriously and diligently developing it can only be to the church's health and advantage. But using a business model as the dominant way of doing this also raises questions.

In the business world, success comes from collecting data, analyzing it according to well thought-out formulas, and using it to develop, implement and evaluate winning strategies. Companies achieve their goals largely on the strength, intelligence and foresight of their leaders. God does not need to show up for them to accomplish their plans and purposes.

Historically, however, the church has been different. Its leaders have been formed through diligently studying the scriptures. It has been more important to understand the Gospel of Matthew than any leadership manual; more important to follow the example of the apostle Paul than that of Bill Gates; more important to be familiar with the life of King David than with the successful business strategies of Southwest Airlines.

In the pages of scripture, we get a very different model of how the church is to operate. Success there does not depend on a person's brilliance, adherence to the latest best practices or ability to master ingenious strategies. It depends on God—on being empowered by the Holy Spirit. So often the people we meet in scripture are failures. Many appear to be inconsequential and insignificant. The secret of their success is their radical reliance on God and their faithfulness in following God's lead.

Obviously, this does not have to be an either/or. One can study scripture and business. All truth is God's truth, and principles that succeed in the marketplace will work in the church as well. But that doesn't mean we should uncritically adopt them. Clearly, one system is going to have to be dominant, and be the basis on which we approach all else. Scripture, in the stories it tells, the approach to God it teaches and the history it invites us to be a part of, is meant to be that foundational system.

So, simple though such questions may be, it seems important that we ask them: How is God shaping our lives and churches, even as God shaped personal lives and public communities in ages past? What is God doing in our life and churches that only God can do? What is there both in our experience and in what we offer others that goes beyond psychology and the culture of success and self-help of the world around us?

Otherwise, instead of being the sacred places they were meant to be, churches will only become more and more like the world around them—like businesses chasing the latest market niche.