

The gift we don't understand

By [Diane Roth](#)

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It was my first winter in rural South Dakota, and despite the worrisome weather, I was planning a road trip. On Sunday morning, one of my parish members came up to me and solemnly handed me a coffee can. It contained a roll of toilet paper, a candle, some matches, and a candy bar. "Put this in your trunk," she said. I had no idea what this was. "Thank you," I said.

It was a winter survival kit. Later on, much later on, I discovered what each item was for. Every piece, including the humble coffee can, could help me survive if I were stranded in a snowstorm.

Each time I baptize someone, I also lay my hands on them and say this prayer:

We give you thanks, O God, that through water and the Holy Spirit you give your daughters and sons new birth, cleanse them from sin, and raise them to eternal life. Sustain them with the gift of your Holy Spirit: the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord, the spirit of joy in your presence, both now and forever.

I have come to think of this prayer as sort of a coffee can full of odd gifts that will end up being everything a baptized person needs in the world.

There was a time in my tradition that we didn't pray this prayer after a young child was baptized. We saved it for confirmation, when it makes more sense for someone to look you in the eye and give you a box of tools, because you are setting out on a

dangerous journey.

But then, for some reason, we read Acts 19, that odd exchange between the apostle Paul and some disciples who have never heard of the Holy Spirit. Oh, they have been baptized all right, but only into John's baptism. The Holy Spirit? They have no idea what this is.

But Paul seems to think that the Holy Spirit is important enough that he baptizes them again, this time in the name of the Lord Jesus. And they begin to speak in tongues and to prophesy. I don't think this display is just for show, just to prove that the Holy Spirit has indeed come upon them. Baptism and the Holy Spirit are necessarily linked. You can't have one without the other; it's a package deal. And if you are going to follow Jesus, you can't live without it.

Sometimes, though, I still think that the Holy Spirit is the coffee can in the trunk of our theological cars. Someone gave it to us. We said "thank you." But we are not sure what it is for.