Missing ingredient: Why spirituality needs Jesus

by Eugene H. Peterson in the March 22, 2003 issue

The seething energies of spirituality are evident everywhere. That is good. What is not so good is that spirituality is also prone to lack of clarity, making it difficult to carry on a conversation about it. In the enthusiasm for firsthand experience, many of the men and women to whom I have been pastor and teacher set aside the Christian's basic spirituality text, the Bible, and take up with new "scriptures" which strike them as fresh and fascinating. Having entered the spiritual culture of self-help and self-sovereignty, their discourse is soon emptied of any gospel distinctiveness.

I love the energy that I discover in my friends but I am wary of the reductions that take place when God is interpreted through fragments of ecstasy or strategies for happiness. I want to harness these spirituality energies in biblical leather and direct them to Jesus.

Spirituality is like a net that, when thrown into the sea of contemporary culture, pulls in a vast quantity of spiritual fish. In our times spirituality has become a major business for entrepreneurs, a recreational sport for the bored, and for some—whether many or few, it's hard to tell—a serious and disciplined commitment to live deeply and fully in relation to God.

Once used exclusively in traditional religious contexts, the word "spirituality" is now used quite indiscriminantly by all sorts of people in a variety of circumstances and with diverse meanings. This once pristine word has been dragged into the rough-and-tumble of the marketplace and playground. Many lament this, but I'm not sure that lament is the appropriate response. We need a term like this.

The attempt to reclaim the word for exclusively Christian or other religious usage usually begins with a definition. But attempts to define spirituality, and they are many, are futile. The term has escaped the discipline of the dictionary. Its current usefulness is not in its precision but rather in the way it names something indefinable yet quite recognizable: transcendence vaguely intermingled with

intimacy. Transcendence: a sense that there is more, a sense that life extends far beyond me, beyond what I get paid, beyond what my spouse and children think of me, beyond my cholesterol count. Intimacy: a sense that deep within me there is a core being inaccessible to the probes of psychologists or the examinations of physicians, the questions of the pollsters, the strategies of the advertisers. Spirituality, though hardly precise, provides a popular term that recognizes an organic linkage between this beyond and within that are part of everyone's experience.

We need a term that covers the waterfront, that throws every intimation of beyond and within into one huge wicker basket, a term that is indiscriminately comprehensive: spirituality.

Historically, the word spirituality is a relative latecomer to our dictionaries. Only very recently has it entered everyday speech. St. Paul used the adjective spiritual (*pneumatikos*) to refer to actions or attitudes derived from the work of the Holy Spirit in all Christians. It was only in the medieval church, primarily in the context of monasticism, that the word began to be used to name a way of life restricted to an elite class of Christian, those who lived at a higher level than ordinary Christians. The lives of spiritual Christians, mostly monks and nuns vowed to celibacy, poverty and obedience, were contrasted with the muddled lives of men and women who married and had babies, who got their hands dirty in fields and markets in a world where "all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil; / and wears man's smudge and shares man's smell. . . ." (Gerard Manley Hopkins). Spirituality then came into use to designate the study and practice of a perfect life before God, of extraordinary holiness in the Christian life. It was a specialized word having to do with only a small number of people and so was never part of everyday speech.

The word got into our common language more or less through the back door. A movement developed among Catholic laity in 17th-century France with the then radical notion that the monasteries had no corner on the well-lived Christian life. The movement insisted that the ordinary Christian was quite as capable of living the Christian life as any monk or nun—and living it just as well. Archbishop François de Fénelon, Madam Jeanne Marie Guyon and Miguel de Molinos, prominent voices in this movement, were silenced under the condemnation of "quietism." The religious establishment, with its nose in the air, used the term *la spiritualité* as a term of derogation for laypeople who practiced their devotion too intensely. It became a snobbish dismissal of upstart Christians who didn't know what they were doing,

writing, thinking and practicing. These were things that were best left in the hands of the experts. But the official church's attempt to silence these laypeople came too late; the cat was out of the bag.

It wasn't long before "spirituality" lost its pejorative tone. Among Protestants, lay-oriented spiritual seriousness came to be expressed in Puritan godliness, Methodist perfection and Lutheran pietism. Spirituality, this loose, vaguely comprehensive word, is now used on the streets with general approval. Now anybody can be spiritual.

Interestingly, some religious experts today are again using the term dismissively. Because there appears to be a widespread and faddish use of the word by men and women judged by credentialed insiders as misguided, ignorant and undisciplined, some professionals are once again taking a condescending stance towards spirituality in its popular forms.

Living fully and well is a goal at the heart of all serious spirituality. Spirit, in our three parent languages (Hebrew, Greek and Latin) carries the root meaning of breath and easily offers itself up as a metaphor for life. God lives and gives life. God lives and brims with life. God lives and permeates everything we see and hear and taste and touch, everything we experience.

Currently, spirituality is the term of choice to refer to this vast and intricate web of livingness. It may not be the best word, but it is what we have. Its primary weakness is that in the English language spirituality has eroded to an abstraction, even though the metaphor of breath can be detected just beneath the surface. As an abstraction spirituality frequently obscures the very thing it is intended to convey—God alive and active and present.

The difficulty is that the term has become widely secularized in our culture and consequently reduced to mean simply "vitality" or "centered energy" or "hidden springs of exuberance" or "an aliveness that comes from within." For most people it conveys no sense of the life of God: Spirit of God, Spirit of Christ, Holy Spirit. The more the word is secularized the less useful it is. Still, it is what we have. Like many ruined or desiccated words (for instance, marriage, love and sin) it requires constant rehabilitation. I find it best to use it as little as possible, following the precedent of our scriptures, which have an aversion to abstractions of any kind, preferring to use stories and metaphors that keep us involved and participating in what is right before

us.

The abstract vagueness of the word easily serves as a convenient cover for idolatry. Idolatry, reducing God to a concept or object that we can use for our benefit, is endemic to the human condition. As long as the word carries vague connotations of sincerity and aspiration for all that is good, it is easy and common for idolatrous motives to quietly and unassumingly attach themselves to it and involve us in ways of living and thinking that are crippling and even destructive.

Superficial misunderstandings can be easily disposed of: spirituality is not immaterial as opposed to material; not interior as opposed to exterior; not invisible as opposed to visible. Quite the contrary; spirituality has much to do with the material, the external and the visible. What it conveys is that something is living, not dead. When the life has gone out of things and people, of institutions and traditions, eventually—and sometimes it takes us a while—we notice the absence. We look for a file-drawer kind of word in which to store the insights, images and desires that convey what we are missing. “Spirituality” works about as well as anything for filing purposes.

The frequent use of this catch-all term is understandable in a society that is variously depersonalized, functionalized and psychologized. Life leaks out of us in numerous ways as we find ourselves treated as objects, roles, images, economic potentials, commodities, consumers. Even though daily life is much simplified and made easier by these various reductions, something in us rebels, at least in fits and starts. Most of us, at least at times, sense that there is something more, something vastly more. We need a word, any word, to name what we are missing.

But if we are going to use the term, and it’s difficult to see how we can avoid it, our use is going to have to be marked by vigilance and attentiveness. We need vigilance in order to discern the de-spiritualization of spirituality, to watch for and name the many and various ways in which we fall prey to the devil’s lure to “be like God.” (Gen. 2:5) The primary way in which this vigilance is maintained is through a continual and careful reading of scripture. And we need attentiveness to notice the many and prolix ways in which God is giving life, renewing life, blessing life. The primary way in which this attentiveness is nurtured is in common worship and personal prayer.

I am quite content to work in this field of spirituality with whatever is given me, however vague and fuzzy. But I am also interested in providing as much clarity and focus as I am able by identifying life, all of life, as God-derived, God-sustained and God-blessed: “I walk before the Lord in the land of the living” (Ps. 116:9).

If the usefulness of the term spirituality lies in its vague but comprehensive suggestiveness of everything beyond and more and deep, the term “Jesus” is useful for gathering all the diffused vagueness into a tight, clear, light-filled focus. In the Christian community there is nothing vague about life. Spirituality is never a subject that we can attend to as a thing-in-itself. It is always an operation of God in which our human lives are pulled into and made participants in the life of God, whether as lovers or rebels.

The Christian community is interested in spirituality because it is interested in living. We give careful attention to spirituality because we know from long experience how easy it is to get interested in ideas about God and projects for God and gradually lose interest in God alive, while we deaden our lives with the ideas and the projects. Because the ideas and projects have the name of God attached to them, it is easy to assume that we are involved with God. It is the devil’s work to get us thinking and acting for God and then subtly to detach us from a relational obedience and adoration of God, substituting our selves, our godlike egos, in the place originally occupied by God. Outside the Christian church, the talk-show spirituality celebrities commodify spirituality. Within the church, entertainment-driven spiritual leaders trivialize spirituality.

Jesus is the name that keeps us attentive to the God-defined, God-revealed life. The amorphous limpness so often associated with spirituality is given skeleton, sinews, definition, shape and energy by the name Jesus. Jesus is the name of a person who lived at a datable time in an actual land that has mountains we can still climb, wildflowers we can photograph, cities in which we can still buy dates and pomegranates and water which we can drink and in which we can be baptized.

Jesus is the central and defining figure in the spiritual life. His life is, precisely, revelation. He brings out into the open what we could never have figured out for ourselves, never guessed in a million years. He is God among us: God speaking, acting, healing, helping. Salvation is the big word into which all these words fit. The name Jesus means God saves—God present and at work saving in our language and in our history.

The four gospel writers, backed up by the comprehensive context provided by Israel's prophets and poets, tell us everything we need to know about Jesus. And Jesus tells us everything we need to know about God. As we read, ponder, study, believe and pray these gospels we find both the entire scriptures and the entirety of the spiritual life accessible and in focus before us in the inviting presence of Jesus of Nazareth, the Word made flesh.

But while the gospel writers present Jesus in a feet-on-the-ground setting not too different from the town and countryside in which we live and in a vocabulary and syntax similar to the language we use when we sit down to the dinner table and when we go out shopping, they don't indulge our curiosity; there is much that they do not tell us. There is so much more that we would like to know. Our imaginations itch to fill in the details. What did Jesus look like? How did he grow up? How did his childhood friends treat him? What did he do all those years of his growing up in the carpentry shop?

It didn't take long, as it turns out, for writers to appear who were quite ready to satisfy our curiosities, to tell us what Jesus was really like. And they keep showing up. But "lives of Jesus"—imaginative constructs of Jesus' life with all the childhood influences, emotional tones, neighborhood gossip and social/cultural/political dynamics worked in—are notoriously unsatisfactory. What we always seem to get is not the Jesus who reveals God to us, but a Jesus who develops some ideal or justifies some cause of the writer. When we finish the book, we realize that we have less of Jesus, not more.

This itch to know more about Jesus than the canonical Gospel writers chose to tell us started early in the second century. The first people who filled in the blanks in the story had wonderful imaginations but were somewhat deficient in veracity; they didn't tell us that the supplementary entertaining details were the product of their imaginations. Some wrote under apostolic pseudonyms to provide authority for their inventions. Others claimed actual Holy Spirit inspiration for their fictions. It wasn't long before the church got more or less fed up with this creative expansion and imaginative tinkering with Jesus and said it had to stop. The church leaders rendered their decision: Matthew, Mark, Luke and John are the last word on Jesus. There is nothing more to be said on the subject.

The ban on inventing new Jesus stories and sayings was not, as some have suggested, repressive. Its effect was to release the imagination for doing what is

proper to it, namely, like Mary the mother of Jesus, to ponder Jesus in our hearts (Luke 2:19, 51), meditating our way into the presence of Jesus as presented by the Gospel writers, meditating so that Jesus is met and either crucified again or believed in again by me. And we have been doing it ever since in sermons and Bible studies, in stories and poems, in hymns and prayers, in acts of obedience and service in Jesus' name.

It is essential that we honor this reticence on the part of the Gospel writers. Spirituality is not improved by fantasies. Spirituality is not a field in which to indulge pious dreams.

By accepting Jesus as the final and definitive revelation of God, the Christian church makes it impossible for us to make up our own customized variations of the spiritual life and get away with it. Not that we don't try. But we can't get around him or away from him: Jesus is the incarnation of God, God among and with us. Jesus gathered God's words spoken to and through God's people and given to us in our scriptures and spoke them personally to us. Jesus performed God's works of healing and compassion, forgiveness and salvation, love and sacrifice among us, men and women with personal names, with personal histories. Because Jesus was born in Bethlehem, grew up in Nazareth, gathered disciples in Galilee, ate meals in Bethany, went to a wedding in Cana, told stories in Jericho, prayed in Gethsemane, led a parade down the Mount of Olives, taught in the Jerusalem temple, was killed on the hill Golgotha, and three days later had supper with Cleopas and his friend in Emmaus, none of us are free to make up our private spiritualities; we know too much about his life, his spirituality. The story of Jesus gives us access to scores of these incidents and words, specific with places and times and names, all of them hanging together and interpenetrating, forming a coherent revelation of who God is and how he acts and what he says.

Jesus prevents us from thinking that life is a matter of ideas to ponder or concepts to discuss. Jesus saves us from wasting our lives in the pursuit of cheap thrills and trivializing diversions. Jesus enables us to take seriously who we are and where we are without being seduced by the intimidating lies and illusions that fill the air and trying to be someone else or somewhere else. Jesus keeps our feet on the ground, attentive to children, in conversation with ordinary people, sharing meals with friends and strangers, listening to the wind, observing the wildflowers, touching the sick and wounded, praying simply and unselfconsciously. Jesus insists that we deal with God right here and now, in the place we find ourselves and with the people we

are with. Jesus is God here and now.

It is basic to the Christian faith that Jesus is, in actual fact, God among us. As hard as it is to believe and as impossible as it is to imagine, Christians do believe it. The entire and elaborate work of salvation from “before the foundation of the world” (Eph. 1:4) is gathered up and made complete in this birth, life, death and resurrection—a miracle of unprecedented and staggering proportions. We acknowledge all this when we, following the example of St. Peter, add the title “Christ” to the name Jesus: Jesus Christ. Christ: God’s anointed, God among us to save us from our sins, God speaking to us in the same language we learned at our mother’s knee, God raising us from the dead to real, eternal life.

You would think that believing that Jesus is God among us would be the hardest thing. But it is not. It turns out that the hardest thing is to believe that God’s work—this dazzling creation, this astonishing salvation, this cascade of blessings—is all being worked out in and under the conditions of our humanity: at picnics and around dinner tables, in conversations and while walking along roads, in puzzled questions and homely stories, with blind beggars and suppurating lepers, at weddings and funerals. Everything that Jesus does and says takes place within the limits and conditions of our humanity. No fireworks. No special effects. Yes, there are miracles. But because they are so much a part of the fabric of everyday life, very few notice. The miracle is obscured by the familiarity of the setting, the ordinariness of the people involved.

This is still the way Jesus is God among us. And this is what is still so hard to believe. It is hard to believe that this marvelous work of salvation is presently taking place in our neighborhoods, in our families, in our governments, in our schools and businesses, in our hospitals, on the roads we drive and down the corridors we walk among the people whose names we know. The ordinariness of Jesus was a huge roadblock to belief in his identity and work in the “days of his flesh.” It is still a roadblock.

In an incident reported by St. John, people who heard Jesus speak a most impressive, a truly astonishing message, in the Capernaum synagogue (offering his own body and blood as food for eternal life!) didn’t believe what he said because he wasn’t more impressive. This man, they called him dismissively (John 6.52). Given their earlier attempt to discredit his extravagant claim (“I am the bread that came down from heaven,” 6.41) by pointing out his unmistakable humanity (“Is this not Jesus,

the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know," 6:42), their phrase "this man" carries the clear implication that he is a nobody. Suddenly many of Jesus' followers weren't buying it any longer—they couldn't fit the miracles and the message into the unimpressive form of the human being they were looking at. Their rhetorical question, "Who can accept it?" called for a negative answer, "Not us."

Jesus brings the undercurrent of dissension into the open, "Does this offend you? Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before? It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless" (John 6:61-63). Which is to say, "So, what is your problem? If you saw me levitating right here before your eyes straight up into heaven, then would you believe what I'm telling you? I guess you would, but it is the spirit, like the wind that you can't see, that gives life, not the flesh, not out-of-this-world wonders." Spirit again. This key word in earlier conversations with Nicodemus and the Samaritan marks the quiet, often concealed means by which God works his salvation among us.

They are not impressed. They walk off, followers no longer: "Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him" (6.66). Because of what? Because Jesus was so obviously human—so ordinary, so uncharismatic, so unexciting, so everyday human.

Jesus asks the twelve if they also are going to abandon him. And here St. John supplies us with St. Peter's punch line: "Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life . . . you are the Holy One of God" (6:68-69). Peter has come to the place where we must all come if we are going to continue following Jesus: he does not impose on Jesus his own ideas or ambitions about how God must do his work; he is willing to let Jesus do it in his own way, as a human being. The perpetual threat to living an authentic, true and honest life is to evade or dump "this man," this Jesus, this ordinary way in which he comes to us and this inglorious company he keeps, and instead pretentiously to attempt to be our own god or fashion a glamorous god or gods that appeal to our vanity. When it comes to dealing with God, most of us spend considerable time trying our own hand at either being a god or making gods. Jesus blocks the way. Jesus is not a god of our own making and he is certainly not a god designed to win popularity contests.

If we are to keep an accurate understanding and practice of the Christian life, the two terms, spirituality and Jesus, need one another. There are a lot of people today who want a spirituality without Jesus. But spirituality without Jesus degenerates into a sloppy subjectivism, tempting us to invent a way of life customized to

accommodate aspiration, inspiration and “meaning” without the inconvenience of morals or personal sacrifice. A commitment to Jesus keeps spirituality in touch with God. And a concern for spirituality keeps Jesus in touch with us.