

One of the things that I've had a tendency to do at times is to "overthink" things, and I'm not alone. So many of us do that, but hopefully we get to a point where we can truly "let go and let God" because as we hear in the Gospel, we are not alone. Jesus reminds us to not let our hearts be troubled, and that He will return, but even before that return, He will send us the Holy Spirit to help us. And when we turn to God, what we'll find is that we can get through whatever life has to throw at us.

Among the T-shirts you'll find in my drawer is one that says in multicolors WJM-TV News Team. There is of course no WJM TV here in the Twin Cities, but WJM was the station where Mary Tyler Moore worked, along with the greatest anchorman of all time, Ted Baxter played by Ted Knight. And of course there was the stoic Lou Grant played by Ed Asner who hated spunk and was the old school news director.

In real life Asner had a great career as an actor, but it took a bit of a leap of faith to get there, for on a summer day in August of 1951, he wasn't sure he could get through an early performance. But what happened was a sense of peace, as if God was reaching out to let him know all was going to be okay.

Thinking back on that day, Asner recalled that his heart was pounding as he stood in the shadowy wings of the University of Chicago's theater. It was summer term, August, 1951, and the intermission for their student production of T.S. Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral* was nearly over.

He could hear the sound of the audience returning to their seats. Nervously, he tugged at his belted costume. The musty purple garment was unlined and scratchy.

He was playing the lead role—Thomas Becket, Archbishop of Canterbury in the year 1170. Becket was a Christian martyr, a man who lived and died in 12th-century England, in loyalty to his faith.

So far, the play had gone well—but Asner remembers he was more than a little nervous about the upcoming final act.

Back in high school in Kansas City, Kansas, he had performed in many radio dramas, but this was his first try at stage acting. Since he'd been in

college, he had dabbled in a lot of subjects, but acting was the only thing that held his interest.

For this reason, more than any other time in my life, he wanted to do a good job.

Restlessly, he tapped his foot.

Don't worry, Ed told himself. You know your lines. You'll do fine.

But the anxiety he was feeling ran deeper than the usual case of opening night jitters.

From the first rehearsal, he had felt unsure about the Becket role.

There was a part of his character—the essence of the man—that he couldn't grasp. His relationship with God seemed so intense, so personal. Ed says he couldn't understand it.

Hey, he told himself again. Take it easy. But he couldn't stop worrying.

Amid the confusion of backstage activity, he mentally reviewed the script,

considering the events leading to the big final scene—Becket’s martyrdom in Canterbury Cathedral.

Under his breath, Asner murmured his final words of faith, hoping that this time he might somehow experience first-hand what Becket felt. It was his last chance.

“For my Lord”—he paused dramatically, waiting for inspiration—“I am now ready to die.”

But nothing happened. As usual, the words came out flat and empty. In the silence that followed, Asner flinched with the bitter realization that he would probably never be able to put himself in Becket’s shoes, no matter how hard he tried.

But, he asked himself, how could he be expected to? Asner was a 20th-century American Jew. What could he possibly have in common with a 12th-century Christian martyr, he wondered.

The more he brooded about it, the more discouraged he became. This wasn't the first time his faith had seemed a stumbling block to his hopes, dreams, desires.

Memories of growing up in Kansas City as one of less than 100 Orthodox Jewish families in a city of 120,000 came flooding back...

In one from his childhood, he remembers it was four p.m., on a gray and muggy afternoon. He was a chubby little kid, waiting after school for the city bus (which was late) that would take him to the streetcar, that would take him to another city bus, that would finally drop him off at Hebrew school.

All the other kids were having fun playing football or basketball, and visiting each other's houses and eating peanut butter and jelly sandwiches.

The sound of laughter caused him to look up as a group of classmates approached, grinning and joking and taking playful punches at one another. When they saw Ed, they waved hello, and stopped for a minute to talk. Then they moved on.

Ed remembers he liked them a lot—and he thinks they liked him, too. But they knew he was different.

As he watched them walk away, he tried to ignore the hollow pit in his stomach. His fingers reached deep into his jacket pocket and curled around the soft, flat yarmulke that had been tucked there since morning.

He would put it on that afternoon before entering the synagogue for lessons with the rabbi.

Sometimes he wondered what it would be like not to be Jewish; to be able to play with the other kids after school; not to have to wear a skull cap; to worship on Sunday instead of Saturday.

But then he chased away such thoughts with warm recollections of home and family behind the red brick walls of their two-story house on Oakland Avenue...the sweet aroma of fresh-baked challah wafting from Mama's always bustling kitchen; the candlelight magic of sundown seders; the mystery and wonder of shared prayers and songs around the dinner table on High Holy Days.

Still, Asner remembered he had to face the fact that when he was away from home, he was lonely. Sometimes a deep fear gripped him—a cold, hopeless feeling that he would never have friends, never be accepted, never be “normal.”

At moments like this, his best friend was his imagination. While waiting for the bus to Hebrew school, he entertained himself by lapsing into fantasy about his favorite Biblical characters.

Like a mighty army of superheroes on parade, they thundered past the reviewing stand of his mind. First came Abraham, wise and faithful patriarch. Then came his son, Isaac, with grandson, Jacob—who later became known as Israel—and great-grandson, Joseph.

Fearless Samson followed, his spectacular mane blowing in the wind. Daniel was there, too, flanked on either side by a pride of protective lions, like so many loyal dogs. All passed by in glorious procession.

Then, finally, came Moses. His face shone brilliant with the light of the Lord. His eyes were ablaze with his vision of the Promised Land—the land he would safely lead his people to, but would never reach himself.

Truly, Ed wondered, these were all great men of God; men who lived and died in loyalty to their faith...

He was daydreaming this when he heard his name called: “Ed!”

He jumped, startled. It was the stage manager.

“Five minutes to curtain,” he said.

“Thanks,” he acknowledged.

At the thought of going onstage, his old anxiety returned with staggering force. He felt like a little kid again—afraid of failing, afraid of being rejected.

Suddenly—and quite unexpectedly—he heard himself saying, “Lord, help me do a good job. Take away my fear. Let me live this role; let me be this

man, Becket, who died so bravely so long ago. Don't..." he hesitated. "Don't let our differences stand in the way."

As he took a deep breath and walked on stage for Becket's final scene, his heart was racing.

Why, he thought frantically, should this time be any different from the rehearsals?

But this time, something was different.

God must have heard him he says, because suddenly he understood that the God Becket prayed to and died for was none other than the same God of his childhood—the same God Who spoke to Abraham, the same God Moses saw face-to-face.

The differences between Christianity and Judaism were great, certainly. Yet there was this tremendous heritage that was shared; faith in one Father, Creator of us all. Where once it seemed that Becket and Asner were strangers, now he knew what they had in common.

Finally, he understood the man.

“For my Lord,” he heard his voice ring out with newfound conviction, “I am now ready to die!”

The words shot out like blazing arrows into the darkened theater. They must have hit their mark; the performance earned good reviews. From that night on, Asner says he knew he was destined to be an actor.

Most importantly, though he knew that never again would his faith be a stumbling block to his hopes, dreams, desires. Rather it would serve as a mighty bridge to meet them.

I'd suggest that if our faith is a bridge, then helping us to cross the bridge is the Holy Spirit; the Advocate Jesus speaks of in the Gospel. Christ has been the first Advocate during his earthly life; the one who revealed to them the truth about who God is and what God wants for us. He taught them that at the heart of God's relationship with humanity is the love God has for them, and His desire that people have eternal life.

Jesus though knows the time is coming when He'll no longer be with them and Ascend to the Father which we'll celebrate next week. And so He promises to send the Holy Spirit. This Holy Spirit makes Christ present for us in various ways. Most importantly there is the Mass where we receive the sacraments. We call upon the Spirit to make present the Body and Blood of Christ in the bread and wine.

But it's important to remember too the Spirit guides us. There are 6 specific Gifts of the Spirit that help us; And even if he was Jewish and not talking about the Holy Spirit specifically, I think in his story from that time in 1951 Ed Asner used all 6.

As written a couple of years ago by Fr. Michael Van Sloun, a priest of our archdiocese who wrote an article on the Spirit in the aptly titled Catholic Spirit, These are:

Wisdom which is the ability to exercise good judgment. It distinguishes between right and wrong, seeks and upholds truth and justice, and balances personal good with the common good. It is in touch with reality,

demonstrates common sense and is prudent. It often increases as a person advances in years and gains life experience. In the Old Testament, wisdom is personified by “Sophia,” the mythical mother of faith, hope and love; while in the New Testament, wisdom is personified by Jesus himself.

Understanding which is the gift of intelligence and enlightenment. It is the ability to think clearly; to perceive, comprehend and interpret information; and to have insight and discern meaning.

Counsel which is good advice. It is the ability to teach, inform, guide, direct, warn, admonish, recommend and encourage. It is not limited to the giving of advice but extends to the ability to graciously receive it. The gift is needed by parents, teachers, coaches, supervisors, mentors, therapists, lawyers, clergy, consultants, elders and spouses — anyone who offers advice to others.

Fortitude that is an unwavering commitment to God or a proper course of action, and it shows itself as moral strength, courage, determination, patient endurance, long suffering, a resolute spirit, stamina and resiliency.

Knowledge which is the ability to study and learn; to acquire, retain and master facts and information; and to put what is learned to good use for constructive purposes.

Fear of the Lord is awe, reverence and respect for God. It acknowledges that everything comes as a gift from God, downplays personal achievement and self-sufficiency, and gladly offers praise, worship and adoration to God.

Piety which is personal holiness, and it includes devotion to God, prayer, virtue, goodness, decency, self-mastery, innocence, the avoidance of sin and obedience to God's will.

All of these though are gifts we cooperate with. And we we head into Pentecost and reflect on how we are sent, it's worth asking ourselves how can we embrace these gifts that God gives us, and use them as tools to grow in faith? The answer is applying them to our daily lives; to studying our faith; through praying daily and coming to Mass; through thinking things through and getting advice from others and being open to what others suggest and of course what God suggests. Asner had all of the tools, he just had to believe in himself that God was with him, calling him to be an actor, and that he could do it.

And with the gifts, let's also remember the Holy Spirit is instrumental in unity. The Holy Spirit helps bring people together, and reminds us how we are all created in God's image. As the Holy Spirit helped Ed Asner to discern the call to be an actor, the Holy Spirit also reminded him he is not other or different, but loved by God just as much as Thomas Becket. In this age of such deep polarization, I think it's more important than ever that we embrace the Holy Spirit to help us see one another through this lens of unity and try to overcome anger and animosity.

Before he died, I'd often visit Fr. Mark Dosh for spiritual direction; the one time moral theology professor of the seminary, Fr. Dosh was this Yoda-like figure in our presbyterate who was very smart, but also had a huge heart and love for the people. One of the things he said to me was how we as priests are "God's imperfect tool" and it echoed what another priest said to my class before we were ordained; that we'll find ourselves hearing confessions of people who are much holier than ourselves. And indeed, as now it'll have been 15 years since I was ordained this upcoming Thursday, sometimes I find myself wondering what Ed Asner did as he was taking that role of Becket. But then I remember the words we all say together before

Holy Communion: Lord, I am not worthy that you should enter under my roof but only say the word and my soul shall be healed. I'm still striving to grow in holiness each and every day. Some days I will fail, other days I will do better, but with me is God who has sent the Spirit. So when you have those moments, wondering what to do, can you do it, or comparing yourself to others, never forget how special and precious you are to God. Never forget you were put here for a reason. Never forget the significance of your vocation and how much you mean to other people. And as Ed Asner said on the stage all those years ago, while you might not go on stage as a curtain opens, every day you get up, you serve your family, and you go out into the world, and do it for the Lord, who is with you every step of the way to make this world a better place through the power of the Holy Spirit working within you. So open yourselves to the guidance of the Spirit, never forgetting what a difference you make.