

I guess it was ten or fifteen years ago when I saw a cartoon in the *New Yorker* magazine that seemed more silly and ridiculous than funny. It was simply a sketch of a business man walking down the sidewalk of a busy city street with a briefcase in his hand and an implanted cell phone antenna protruding from his head.

People at that time were really just starting to use cell phones more often. Technology had progressed to the point that you no longer needed one of those monstrous, clunky, corded phones mounted on the center console of your car. Now people were actually able to carry their phones around with them, and with some frequency we were starting to see people talking on their phones at street corners. The *New Yorker* cartoon of the businessman with a cell phone implanted in his head was supposed to be a gross exaggeration of where things seemed to be going.

Only, it has turned out not to be such an exaggeration.

Microchip technology has already led Motorola and Oakley to partner in developing stereo sun specs. A snowboard company is now making Bluetooth enabled jackets. Wristwatch phones are already on the market, and “intelligent earrings” are around the corner. Within ten years, some experts predict, cell phone implants will be available, and ethicists are now talking about how this is going to change the nature of what it means to be human. (“In Your Face Interface,” *St. Petersburg Times*, October 5, 2006)

But I don't think we have to wait ten years to find out.

It might not be as elegant as an implant, but the small, wireless earpieces that are now available already ensure that, whenever you are in a public space, business transactions, strategy meetings and social calls are going on all around you all the time. People are talking on the phone as they board an airplane, and they only reluctantly turn off the device when they are ordered to do so at take-off. And almost immediately after the plane touches down at the destination airport, cell phones start ringing and the business meetings and conversations resume.

We are more connected than ever. And yet it seems we've never felt so disconnected.

We are constantly in touch. Yet, it seems that we have never been so out of touch. We talk about “touching base” with each other while we're on the run, as if our lives resembled a game of tag. But for many, there persists a deep-down loneliness and sense of isolation on the level of the soul.

We are so wired and plugged into the affairs of the world, but often we feel unhooked from God and each other. Our lives are full, but we've never felt so empty.

Jesus began his sermon on the mount with a series of beatitudes which amounted to a series of seeming contradictions. The poor are rich, the weeping will be joyful, the hungry will be filled, the meek will inherit everything And we read these Beatitudes every year on All Saints' Sunday as a reminder that there is much more to our lives than the busy world of getting and spending, where we lay waste our powers.

When Jesus said, you have eyes but you do not see; you have ears, but you do not hear,... perhaps he was pointing out that there is much more to our lives than we usually perceive. Maybe he was saying that we all have the necessary spiritual faculties, but we're not using them. And these spiritual faculties can atrophy. We all have ears of the heart and eyes of the soul, but we are so exclusively committed to using our temporal faculties, we are so busy staying engaged with the transient world through our physical senses, that we simply are not listening with the ear of our hearts, nor seeing with the eyes of our faith.

Some of you, I know, have had the experience of stepping off a crowded street in Europe, a street that is teeming with life at midday, and walking into the nave of a cool, darkened medieval church with heavy wooden doors, stone archways, and smoothly worn stone floors. When these churches are mostly empty, the merest whisper seems to carry, and the softest footsteps seem to echo. We've all been in quiet places, but the *quality* of this quiet is different. It's a sacred silence, and it invites a sacred silence inside ourselves. The effect of walking into these silent, holy places -- and listening with the ear of the heart -- is that you can become aware of one of the greatest discoveries of faith: that the life teeming in the streets outside is nothing compared to the life teeming in the silence within.

The medieval Spanish mystic, John of the Cross, famously remarked that "silence is God's first language." That is, God communicates most meaningfully and deeply with us in the language of silence. Clergy, theologians and churches then try to express their experiences of God through sermons and prayers and music. But no words or music can fully express what God is communicating to us in God's first language, silence.

Years ago when I was rector of a downtown church in Charlotte, NC, the receptionist came into my office one day and showed me a check for \$10,000. A local businessman had just stopped by the church to make his pledge for the year, as he did every year. And he always said the same thing. "I would like to pay my pledge for the coming year," he said. "I am not a member of this church, but I come here almost every day before I go to work. My time alone in your empty church each morning is the most important 30 minutes of my day. Of course, my name and address are on my check, but please make sure I do not end up on your mailing list, and please do not send me a receipt. I am simply grateful you are here. There are fewer and fewer sacred places in the world. And I want to contribute to maintaining this one for your members and for people like me who are your invisible parishioners."

I think churches have much to learn from this man who was my invisible, unorthodox and grateful parishioner. While our communities are teeming with activity and controversies,

and while clergy and other religious people like me are making pious pronouncements, God is speaking, using God's first language, and it is a language with which we are less and less comfortable, a language that seems increasingly foreign to us, a language that even seems to make us nervous and fidgety and restless. Surely it is a natural and most important ministry of churches today to promote communities of attentive listening in a contentious culture of complaint.

We have become experts at staying in touch, but we are losing touch.

We are constantly wired and plugged in, but we are becoming more and more disconnected.

On All Saints Sunday, we might experience a call to a deeper life. It's a life in which the apparent truths by which we usually order our lives no longer apply. It's a life in which the poor know about true wealth, but the rich waste away in worry about never having enough. It's a life in which self-emptying attentiveness leads to a sense of fullness, and the life overflowing with activity has a peculiar sense of emptiness. It's a life in which the last are first, the first are last, and the servant of all is the greatest of all.

Deep down, we know about this life, this life that Jesus called abundant, because we know that we've never felt such a sense of holy communion with God and with each other as we have when we are content to be quietly and attentively present with one another; and we've never felt the sense of isolation and disconnection we feel now that technology can keep us in touch 24/7. The more we turn to humanly implanted microchips, the more it seems we turn away from the divinely implanted faculties of the soul.

All Saints Sunday might remind us of the larger invisible world to which we all belong, of the God whose first language is the most elegant language of silence, and of the deeper life of compassion and kindness to which we have all been called.