**Steve Spilde:** Today it is my extreme pleasure to welcome John McHugh. John is a longtime presenter for the Spiritual Direction Preparation Program. He has presented Biblical Spirituality to our participants and does an amazing job. Beyond that, John is a very popular presenter at the Franciscan Spirituality Center. [He is] a wonderful biblical teacher [and] a wonderful representative of what it means to embody spirituality in life. Welcome, John.

**John McHugh:** Thank you. Steve. It’s good to be here.

**Steve:** Just to say a few things about John, John had a part of his life where he was very involved in ministry. Then for the past 16 years he’s been part of the senior management team for Kwik Trip, who is a big employer in the area surrounding La Crosse, Wisconsin. That area continues to grow, and you’ve been part of that growth. How would you describe your current job?

**John:** Steve, that’s a great question. I have a lot of different things I do, and none of it fits into a single title. Officially, I’m the director of public relations, but on a broader scheme, anything to deal with culture in our company. [That includes] making sure that we live our mission and values as a company. [I] oversee a lot of what happens in our training program. I work with the family members who come into the company, [meaning] the third generation and the grandkids now coming in to work with them. I make sure that they get on the right foot, and I spend a lot of time out in public talking about our culture at Kwik Trip. We’re listed as a top workplace in Wisconsin, Minnesota, and Iowa. This last year, even Glassdoor nationally [ranked Kwik Trip] the 79th-best company to work for in the country, which is pretty huge for a small regional company like this. A lot of places want to know how you create that kind of culture, so I’ll go out and give keynotes and addresses about that.

**Steve:** Knowing you, you really do identify what you do as a ministry. How would you draw the parallels between more traditional forms of ministry and what you do in the business world?

**John:** I would say this. As a matter of fact, when Don Zietlow, our CEO and owner, hired me 16 years ago, he knew that I did a lot of public speaking [and] adult education, a lot in the Gospels and in religion, officially. He said, “When I hire you, I’m going to bring you on deck and you’re going to tell the same stories you’ve already told. But sometimes you’re going to take out the name Jesus.” I have former students in mind from Aquinas who are now here at Kwik Trip who say, “I remember when you told that story back at Aquinas, and now you tell it here.” It really is telling the same stories, but in a way that helps all of us realize that no matter where we’re at in life, the Gospel is alive and well and keeps us going.

**Steve:** This is my interest with everyone I interview on this podcast, but kind of explore how people’s understanding of Jesus, of God, of Spirit, has evolved throughout their lifetime. Look back to when you were young. How would you describe your religious tradition?

**John:** I grew up in a small town near central Wisconsin called Hatley, [which is] a town of 300 people. It’s 99.9 percent Catholic, so everything revolved around the church. My family of origin is obviously Catholic as well. Everything revolved around the church life and the school life. We had a parochial school. Religion wasn’t just something you did on Sunday for an hour. It really infused the whole life of the community, whether that was through fundraisers or activities or funerals or weddings – everything revolved around the church. I remember as a young boy in third grade somebody said, ‘Who do you think God is?” I remember saying this exactly: “God is the guy that lives in the little burning house.” People would look at me funny and [ask], “What do you mean God who lives in the little burning house?” In the Catholic tradition we have something called the Tabernacle, which is where the Blessed Sacrament is reserved. As a young boy in Catholic school, Sister took us into the church and pointed to the Tabernacle and said, “That’s where Jesus lives.” Right above the Tabernacle was this statue of Saint Florian. Saint Florian is our patron saint of the parish there. Saint Florian was the Patron Saint of firefighters. In this statue, Saint Florian is pouring this bucket of water on top of this house that’s burning, and the house was located right above the tabernacle. So when Sister said, “That’s where Jesus lives,” I always wondered, “Why does Jesus live in a house that’s burning?” because I had no idea who Saint Florian was. In my mind, that was the guy that lived in the little burning house.

**Steve:** As you got older, can you remember a time when that understanding changed, like, wait a second – Jesus isn’t living in a burning house. Jesus is something else. Could you remember a time when that shifted?

**John:** For me, I was real blessed throughout my years growing up in Hatley; we had three tremendous priests. And they were the ones that really introduced me, I think, to a living Jesus, in different ways. Our first priest that I remember, Father Sigismund Lengowski – we called him “Father Zig” because we couldn’t say the full name – he was the most kind, compassionate man I’ve ever met. I hate to use the cliché, but you that cliché that when you’re with him you’re the most important person in his world? He really did that. Even as a young boy after Mass when I was a Mass server, he would just sit and chat with you and he would ask questions. He really embodied for me what it meant to live a life of compassion and other-centeredness. When he passed away tragically, it was sad for all of us. Then we had a priest, Father Chester Osowski, who was probably one of the best preachers I’ve ever heard. He was the one for me that really said, “This Jesus that you hear about in the gospels is still very much alive in our life. And this how the gospels are living even today.” He modeled that from a gospel perspective for me. And that matured even deeper after he left. We had a priest, Father Abraham, who was just a huge mentor for me for many, many years. He was the guy who lived the gospel of joy. He had a knack for throwing huge parties. He loved to cook. When he first came to the parish a lot of the people would say, “Father, you’re throwing too many parties. This isn’t all about celebration.”

One time I was with him – I was a freshman in high school at the time – and we were shopping at the IGA, our small grocery store in town. He had two grocery carts full of food because he was going to have a huge party for the parish council. One lady came up to him and said, “You know, Father, you have too many parties. We don’t all like it.” And without batting an eye, he said, “You know, lady, Jesus’ number one image for the Kingdom of God is a banquet. You don’t like it here, you ain’t going to like it up there.” And he really lived that, so it was really those three guys who, for me, introduced me to a living Jesus, and a gospel that really could influence our lives. I was very blessed with those three gentlemen.

**Steve:** When you took the job with Kwik Trip and you were invited to talk about the Kingdom but don’t include the word ‘Jesus,’ how has your understanding of Jesus or your understanding of God had to evolve into this position?

**John:** Steve, that’s a good question. I’m not so sure that it changed or evolved much at all. A couple things. When I read through the Gospels, you see a person who is probably the perfect CEO. We use this term all the time: servant leadership. Jesus was the quintessential servant leader. I think in the business world if you want to be an effective leader, follow what Jesus did. I’ll give you a couple of concrete examples. There are several times in which the Apostles have this discussion among themselves as, who is the greatest? Who is the greatest? And of course, when Jesus finds out they’re having that discussion, it just doesn’t sit real well. In the business world, if you start asking yourself, “Am I one of the greatest?” “Am I one of the most important?” - those are the people who aren’t good leaders. But I think the best leaders are the people like Jesus. And in significant moments when Jesus encounters people, he has that kind of compassion for them. And I think in the business world, who are the leaders that we follow? They are the leaders who that kind of compassion for us. If there is a co-worker in my department who I can tell just isn’t themselves lately, I’ll take the time to sit down in their office and say, “Hey, what’s going on?” Sometimes it’s an hour and a half conversation. For me, it’s really modeling even more effectively what Jesus did. If I can do that on a daily basis, I think in terms of leadership in corporate America, it works splendidly.

**Steve:** As you know, I’m a big fan of John McHugh. It’s always a treat when you come to present Biblical Spirituality to the participants in SDPP. I’ve had a lot of seminary classes [and] a lot of Bible classes, [and] you’re one of the most gifted biblical teachers I’ve ever known. You understand it inside and out. [You] really go into the original languages and make that come alive. I was sure my understanding, and your reaction to it … I was raised in a very fundamentalist understanding of the Scripture. It was really kind of like, this world that you live in isn’t the real one. The real one is somewhere else, and the Bible will tell you about this other world. The Bible is kind of detached from reality, and you almost had to learn a new jargon, and it was true because the Bible said it. I’ve come to understand that, no, the world we live in is the real world, and the Bible really helps us to understand that. I see the way you teach the Bible, and I think that as you teach the Gospel in a business setting, it’s like, if you want to be a good leader, Jesus models that. He’s not telling you to do something other; it’s like he’s telling you how it works. This is how it works best – do it this way. How do you respond to that?

**John:** For me, I think my understanding of the Scriptures comes from several different places. First of all, good academics. I was trained at the University of St. Thomas for my undergrad. [I spent] four years at the Gregorian University in Rome, Italy, with some of the best Scripture scholars in the world. We had to have a fluent knowledge of Hebrew for the Hebrew Scriptures, first of all, and then Greek for the New Testament. First of all, it’s grounded in good scholarship, number one. Number two, I think my approach to the Gospel is grounded in my prayer time. When I do practically, this is how I pray. Every morning when I get up, I spend time with the Gospel for this upcoming Sunday. Actually, I have an app on my iPhone. I used to have a lectionary, which is the readings, and now I just do it on the phone. Every morning for an entire week I pray through that Gospel, and I ask myself, “Lord, show me how this Gospel reading also translates into what I’m doing, and what the rest of us are doing this week.” And I think it speaks, when you listen that way. I’ll give you an example. This week it’s the Gospel of Mark, Chapter 1, Verses 21-28. It’s the story of Jesus, who goes into the synagogue for the first time in his public ministry. In the synagogue, there is a man with an unclean spirit, and we all know how the story ends: that Jesus is going to cure him at some point in time.

But a couple of things. I’m in awe of the people in the synagogue who allowed him to stay there, because I think sometimes in religious traditions today, if someone has an unclean spirit … That’s symbolic for all kinds of things. We can say a person is demonic or they’re crazy [and] we want to exclude them and say they don’t belong here [and] they shouldn’t be here. They allowed that person to stay, and who’s the one that heals him? It’s Jesus. It’s not the people in the synagogue. It’s not the religious leaders. It’s not the Apostles. At the end of the day, if we as human beings start to make distinctions between who is clean and unclean, we’re going to exclude people. And I don’t ever see Jesus in his ministry excluding people. And even when the disciples at one point in time later in the Gospel try to cure somebody with an unclean spirit, Jesus comes down and [asks], “What are you doing?” [and they respond], “We’re trying to do this and we’re not real successful.” Jesus says this: “This kind can only be cured with prayer.” Only with prayer. What he’s telling them is at the end of the day, we need to be rather inclusive for all kinds of people, no matter what their issue. And we can’t exclude them because they’re unclean or demonic or their approach is demonic. To me, that Gospel from 2,000 years ago for this week speaks exactly with what we’re dealing with in today’s world because you think of how many people are making determinations [regarding] “bad” or “good,” and you should be excluded or not included. At the end of the day, I think it’s probably wise for us to include all people, let Jesus do the healing, and make sure that when we do have to be involved in that healing that it’s done in a perspective of prayer. They all do.

**Steve:** I would feel fairly confident that you bump into people, though, as teammates at Kwik Trip [who] have a different understanding of the Bible, where it really is used to exclude people. How do you deal with that when you run into people who see it very differently and maybe judge how you use the Scripture?

**John:** Frankly, in my 16 years at Kwik Trip, I really haven’t dealt with a negative approach to the Scriptures. I’ve often said the higher up you went in this company, the nicer the people got. They really are compassionate people. They’re people of prayer, and they’re people whose faith is real important to them. I’ve never once told one of the stories and [had] somebody come back to me and [say], “Whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa!” Instead, I’ve seen people go, “Thanks for putting this in perspective.” There are a lot of people on the team who attend my sessions at the Spirituality Center who say, “It’s just good to hear this perspective of the Gospel.” And I think this: I think when the Gospel is truly proclaimed and it’s consistent with who Jesus is – [which is] a message of inclusivity, of compassion, of self-sacrifice, of how much God loves us – that’s what we call the truth. And when people hear the truth [and] they recognize the truth, there’s not much debate. There’s really acceptance.

**Steve:** As you look back on your life and start with Jesus living in the burning house, how would you describe the Jesus that you know now?

**John:** I really concentrate on the Gospel of Luke, Chapter 15, which is what I call “God’s Lost and Found Department.” It’s the lost coin, the lost sheep, the lost son. Most Scripture scholars say if you want the best understanding of who God is from Jesus’ perspective, that’s the parables – specifically with the prodigal son. That’s the image of a God who is so happy to have us back that God runs to us. The Jewish scholar Montefiore once said the difference between all versions of God and this God of the Christian Gospel is this is the first time God runs to us. In so many religious traditions, it’s all about us finding God. In our tradition, it’s about God finding us. For me, that radical love [and] the fact the Father is moved with compassion when he sees that son a long way off and he runs to him. I’ve said this many times: If people remember only one message from anything I’ve ever said about the Gospel, [it’s] know the moment at which you die and you go to the other side of life, know that you’re going to encounter a God that runs to you and is so happy to see you and grab you and hug you. Unfortunately, I think too many people have an opposite image of God. They have an image of God that I call “The Santa Claus Image.” He’s counting down who’s naughty and who’s nice. It’s God as judge. I’m not so sure that’s consistent with Jesus’ message. And so when people realize how radically they’re loved by God, that gives you the freedom to be who you are. It also gives you the freedom to do what this world needs.

I don’t know of too many people who have been positively motivated to change our world because of fear, or positively change the world because of anger or because of retribution. I think the people who have positively impacted their life, they were motivated by love and knowing the fact that they were deeply loved. And when you know you’re deeply loved, you can extend that love to others and it opens your heart for compassion and understanding in a way that I think is really transformative. That’s my image of God. It’s Luke [Chapter] 15. It’s the father who runs to us. A lot of people misinterpret that parable and they think, “The son is actually contrite. He’s got his act together and he’s seeking forgiveness.” But if you read the story, the son isn’t contrite at all. He’s not sorry for what he did, blowing all his dad’s money. He’s going back because he’s hungry. It’s still self-serving. He hasn’t converted at all. People think, “You need to convert. You need to change, and then you go back to God and that’s how it works.” This is a kid who doesn’t have any contrition whatsoever. He isn’t sorry. He wants to feed his belly. Yet his father runs to him and is so compassioned to have him back.

**Steve:** I love when you tell that story. You come and you tell that story, and it’s always powerful every time. Part of the reason it’s powerful every time is, you get emotional just to say the phrase. The emotion comes to your voice. Thank you. It’s an important story that needs to be shared. I’m interested in how that story shows up for you in your work.

**John:** A couple things. I think there are so many people, especially in the last 11 months of our world, who really have an emptiness and a loneliness, and who are really searching. To be real frank, everybody here who works with me at Kwik Trip knows my background and knows I was in ministry for 11 years before I came to Kwik Trip. My door has probably been closed more in the last 11 months than ever before. And by closed, I mean this: Someone comes in, they shut the door and they sit across from my desk and say, “I just need to talk.” I think for those of us who really believe in that kind of image of God as compassion and understanding and inviting, we create a space in our hearts to allow those conversations to take place, and just to have a sacred place for people to say, “I need to talk about some of this emptiness and loneliness, and how do I find that?” Part of that loneliness, frankly, there are a whole host of reasons why that’s happening. Sometimes it’s a situation like this sociologically that elevates the stuff that’s already been there, but sometimes we cover it up because we’ve been too busy and going in five different directions. Now, when things have slowed down and you can’t run away from things and you can’t go on vacation someplace else and you can’t do the things that normally were distractions for us, it’s forcing us sometimes to really look at, what is the real substance in my life and meaning in my life? And where do I find that substance and that meaning? I think those conversations are much more prominent today.

**Steve:** I like when you use the term “creating a space in your heart to receive those stories.” So much of what I do, so much of what the Franciscan Spirituality Center is about, [is] spiritual direction, receiving people, [and] giving them a safe space to tell their stories, which you’re doing in your office. People oftentimes when they’re looking at becoming spiritual directors are looking at, what are the skills I need to acquire? Our program is less a program about teaching you how to do things [and] instead becoming the sort of person who can receive peoples’ stories. Your image is beautiful: creating that space inside. Thank you for that image.

**John:** As a matter of fact, Steve, I’ve had people here at Kwik Trip who have come to me as new and emerging leaders and say, “I really want to be a leader who is consistent with this culture and somebody who is there for my people. What should I do?” You know what I tell them to do? Go do the Spiritual Direction Preparation Program, and I have some people who are in that right now. I say that my goal is not to turn you into a spiritual director professionally. … I know these people well enough to know they already have that spot in their heart [and] they’re naturally inclined to do that. That program really helps them really embody that even better and do it more effectively, and in a way that’s really beautiful and life-giving. I give that encouragement, and I give that suggestion. And so far, nobody has been disappointed.

**Steve:** There isone last question I want to ask you in thinking about that. What are the things that you need to do – that John McHugh needs to do – in order to protect that space, to enhance that space, to have that space available that you can offer to people?

**John:** For me, it all starts, as I mentioned, with that prayer time in the morning; that’s sacred time for me. There’s a reason why I do it in the morning – not just because I’m a morning person, which I am. If I don’t do it first thing in the morning, the rest of the day gets eaten up. There was a time in my life in which I’d say, “I’m not going to do it right away. I’ll get to it when I get home from work or after the dishes are done.” What happens is the day eats that time up and then I get to the end of day and [I say], “I never spent that time.” I’m real blessed that I have a very accurate prayer barometer. If I don’t spend time in prayer in the morning, the people around me know. As a matter of fact, a good friend of mine here at work who works in human resources one morning sat next to me – and this is the first meeting of the morning – and I hadn’t had my prayer time. I can’t remember exactly what happened. I sat down and I don’t even think I said two words. She looked at me and she said, “You didn’t pray today, did you?” I’m very blessed that I have a very accurate prayer barometer – if I don’t do it, some of the cheese starts to slip off my cracker. I know that.

I’m also blessed that the lovely and talented Maggie McHugh, my wife, can tell if my prayer hasn’t been good and consistent. She can sense that. Again, I’m very lucky because that barometer is so accurate. I can’t go for more than a day or two missing prayer. What happens for me, it’s so sensitive. I get crabby. I get ornery. I start to really bite at people. When somebody comes to my door, it’s like, “I don’t have time for this.” I feel it; that’s just how I’m hardwired. The opposite is also true. I’ve noticed this in the last 53 years of my life: The better I pray in the morning, and the more I’m open to God’s grace, the more people come to my door. I’ll get home at night and Maggie will [ask], “How was the day today?” I’ll say, “It was a pretty busy day.” She’ll say, “Yeah, I can see.” I think part of that is when we sit down, we say, “Lord, use me today as you need me.” As you well know, there’s two questions I always ask every single morning in prayer after I’m done with the Gospel: “Lord, what do you need me to do today?” and, “What do you need me to do today that matters for all eternity?” I always ask those two questions. I don’t get an answer. It’s not like the heavens open up and all of a sudden God says, “This is what I want you to do, my beloved son.” But what happens is during the course of the day God then puts people where they need to be with me, and vice-versa. For me, that’s what keeps me grounded. If I didn’t do that – and if it wasn’t God’s grace in me … at the end of the day – it wouldn’t be good and I wouldn’t be John McHugh.

It started way back when I was a young boy in school. I remember one of the sisters teaching us this prayer: “Lord, give me the courage and the generosity and the love to follow your call, whatever that may be today. Lord, give me the courage and the generosity and the love to follow your call, whatever that may be today.” That’s how that started way back, probably back in third grade. And I think when you start your day with that, that makes a difference and gives me the energy to do what I need to do.