

LivingFaith

WHERE FAITH MAKES A DIFFERENCE IN OUR EVERYDAY LIVES

Week Four - Rededicating Ourselves to the Spirit of Encounter

Opening Prayer (St. Clement of Alexandria)

- Let us put away all blindness to the truth, all ignorance: and removing the darkness that obscures our vision like fog before the eyes, let us contemplate the true God. Amen.
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Introduction

- Themes
 - Spiritual blindness
 - Contrition
 - Discipleship
 - Quiet Reflection
 - We all experience situations where we feel left out, marginalized, ignored, out of place. It can leave us feeling inadequate and alone. At times we feel something is missing in our lives, but we may not have the vision to see what it is and how to resolve the problem.
 - Brief Discussion
 - Consider a time when you felt "disabled" - either physically, mentally or spiritually. What was the situation? How did you deal with it?
 - What techniques would you recommend to others as a way to achieve clarity? What has worked best for you?
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Gospel Reading - John 9:1, 6-9, 13-17, 34-3 "The Man Born Blind"

As Jesus passed by he saw a man blind from birth.

He spat on the ground and made clay with the saliva,
and smeared the clay on his eyes, and said to him,
"Go wash in the Pool of Siloam" — which means Sent —.
So he went and washed, and came back able to see.

His neighbors and those who had seen him earlier as a beggar said,
"Isn't this the one who used to sit and beg?"
Some said, "It is, "
but others said, "No, he just looks like him."
He said, "I am."

They brought the one who was once blind to the Pharisees.
Now Jesus had made clay and opened his eyes on a sabbath.
So then the Pharisees also asked him how he was able to see.
He said to them,
"He put clay on my eyes, and I washed, and now I can see."
So some of the Pharisees said,
"This man is not from God,
because he does not keep the sabbath."
But others said,
"How can a sinful man do such signs?"
And there was a division among them.
So they said to the blind man again,
"What do you have to say about him,
since he opened your eyes?"
He said, "He is a prophet."

They answered and said to him,
"You were born totally in sin,
and are you trying to teach us?"
Then they threw him out.

When Jesus heard that they had thrown him out,
he found him and said, "Do you believe in the Son of Man?"
He answered and said,
"Who is he, sir, that I may believe in him?"
Jesus said to him,
"You have seen him, and
the one speaking with you is he."
He said,
"I do believe, Lord," and he worshiped him.

Fr. Foppiano's Reflection

Video link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sfUkkWOofw8>

Introduction and Review

Welcome to Week #4 of LivingFaith. We have reached the half-way point of Lent! Congratulations!

Our Lenten journey has lead us to reflect on areas of our lives where we are tempted, stepping out of our comfort zones in faith with God, and what it means to have a healthy desire for happiness in our lives.

These spiritual lessons are true for us personally and for our St. Agnes and St. William of York Community. Our spiritual reflections have also been a reflection on the Mission, Vision and Purpose of our community.

This week's readings tell the tale of two encounters. We hear about David and how God's call sets him apart to become king over the chosen people. And the man born blind who encountered the healing touch of Jesus.

David

David was the youngest of Jesse's sons. His station was so lowly that he was tending his father's flock – shepherds and shepherding sheep were not thought of as prestigious jobs in the ancient world. And here God breaks into the lowliness of David's life and calls him to this incredible task.

Do we believe that God continues to break into our everyday lives? Do we have confidence that God is involved in the day-to-day affairs of our lives? Studies tell us that most Catholics do not believe in a personal God. Yet God is so personally involved in the affairs of humanity that he chose to take on our human condition in the Incarnation. If he went to that length for us why would we think that he's disinterested now?

The Man Born Blind

The man born blind was going about his daily routine when Jesus walked up to him, smeared mud on his eyes, and healed him. Talk about God breaking into the affairs of daily life! This encounter with Jesus leads the man to witness to the Lord and what he did for him to the Jewish authorities. This encounter sets off a series of events and through them all the man gives an honest witness and is given the gift of faith. Towards the end of the story the man confidently proclaims: "I do believe, Lord..." And we are told that he fell down and worshiped Jesus.

I would like to posit a theory that so many Catholics do not believe in a personal God because God is not in the habit of breaking into our daily affairs in an extraordinary way. It is perhaps even harder to believe in the closeness of God in the 21st century because we have built up so many walls around ourselves in, and other people out. In a way we have become so used to the extraordinary: we can see people on the other side of the globe from our phones, we can get instantaneously information from the internet, and we can even have Amazon Prime deliver in under an hour right to our doorstep. The Amazon drones got so much press coverage recently because we've become bored waiting 2 days for home delivery and this is the newest thing in instantaneous gratification. God would have to do something pretty spectacular to get our attention! And there is the perennial question of why God lets bad things happen to good people. This is perhaps the single greatest stumbling block to belief in a personal God for most people.

Engaged Catholics

Matthew Kelly in his book, ***The Four Signs of a Dynamic Catholic*** shares some fascinating research about transforming our Catholic people into an engaged people.

There is a general principle in the secular world that 80% of people do 20% of the work. For example, Coca-Cola sells hundreds of thousands of Cokes each day but they generate most of their revenue from big companies that serve millions of Coke products everyday like McDonalds and Marriott.

Kelly wondered if this principle held true in Catholic parishes. So his Dynamic Catholic Institute conducted years of research and discovered that in Catholic parishes it is actually 6.4% of registered parishioners who contribute 80% of volunteer hours. 6.8% of registered parishioners donate 80% of financial contributions, and there is an 84% overlap between these two groups. So, just 7% of Catholics are accomplishing more than 80% of parish ministry and support in the United States!

The research went further to discern the four characteristics which mark the 7% of parishioners who are highly engaged in parish life. From that research Kelly identifies four signs of a dynamic Catholic. They are Prayer, Study, Generosity, and Evangelization.

If we could reach just one more percent of our community in the course of a year that would equate to an 11.4% increase in volunteer hours to reach more people and increased revenue to support the mission. Imagine if we increased by one percent each year – in a decade the parish would be transformed!

Four Signs of a Dynamic Catholic

Are these four signs by Dynamic Catholic present in our lives? Dynamic Catholics have a commitment to daily prayer with a set time and structure. Dynamic Catholics are active learners. They take advantage of time to sit at the feet of the master, Jesus, and learn from him through reading Catholic literature or listening to Catholic broadcasts. Dynamic Catholics see generosity as the heart of the response to Christ's activity in their lives. This is often expressed as financial generosity but it spills into other areas of life especially in their interactions with people. And finally, Dynamic Catholics want to share their faith with others and share their love of God with them.

Each of these characteristics may be more or less present in each of our lives. We may be part of the 7% right now. We might be part of the 93%. Whatever the case may be, the principle of continuous improvement still applies. That is to

make small steps, which at first may seem insignificant, but over time will add up to great change.

Think of a person who is morbidly obese. If you tell them to run a marathon tomorrow they're not going to do it. But if you tell them to walk on a treadmill for 5 minutes a day, over time that 5 minutes is going to add up and eventually grow to 10 and 20 minutes and so-on. Continuous improvement over time leads to great change.

If we look at the four areas and find ourselves lacking in one of them, what is a small step that we can take to get moving? If there are areas where we are strong, what small steps can we take to grow?

The Parish

How is this lived out in the parish? Many of our Catholic people are content to remain exactly where they are and nothing is going to move them. No amount of personal witness, fervor for the faith, or excitement is going to force them to sing a hymn or start serving their brothers and sisters. We have to pray for them and ask God to break through their suits of armor.

There are, on the other hand, a large group of people that are an untapped resource. They are hungry for spiritual growth or to begin stepping out of their comfort zones but we just haven't shown them a way to do that and so they stay just where they are.

There are also another group of people who are hurting for one reason or another. Either they have sins which weigh them down, sufferings in their life or in the lives of people whom they love, or just those who have been bruised and battered by the world. They want answers and the Church can provide them.

A common denominator among all of these people is that they all need a place to feel like they belong. And that is what the parish should be. Belonging is the great hook that will bring people to meet the Lord in the 21st century.

Conclusion

It is clear that a vast majority of Catholics need to take baby steps to start moving. The 93% figure may seem overwhelming but think of the incredible potential that's there. Some of the 93% are sitting in our pews every Sunday. Some attend Mass a few times a year; others not even that much. Moving each group in small steps may seem impossible but if we remember that God is with us and wants his people to have an active faith life then it is more than possible: it is our mission!

May God bless you today and throughout this week!

Group Discussion

- What can we as a community do immediately to help those already connecting through the sacramental life of the church (Mass/Eucharist, Baptism, Confirmation, Marriage, etc.) become fully engaged in the life of our parish?
- In his book ***Can You Drink the Cup?*** Henri Nouwen describes community as a mosaic in which every small piece, no matter how seemingly insignificant by itself, has an essential role to play. How do we convince our parishioners everyone has an essential role to play in the "mosaic" of our parish?
- What "blindness" does our parish family need to set aside to become a community of joyful welcome and hospitality?

Reflection - Pope Francis, Angelus Message, March 30 2014

- Our lives are sometimes similar to that of the blind man who opened himself to the light, who opened himself to God, who opened himself to his grace. Sometimes unfortunately they are similar to that of the doctors of the law: from the height of our pride we judge others, and even the Lord! Today, we are invited to open ourselves to the light of Christ in order to bear fruit in our lives, to eliminate unchristian behaviors, behaviors that are sins. We must repent of this, eliminate these behaviors in order to journey well along the way of holiness, which has its origin in baptism. We, too, have been "enlightened" by Christ in baptism, so that, as St. Paul reminds us, we may act as "children of light" (Ephesians 5:8), with humility, patience and mercy.
- Let us ask ourselves about the state of our own heart? Do I have an open heart or a closed heart? It is opened or closed to God? Open or closed to my neighbor? We are always closed to some degree which comes from original sin, from mistakes, from errors. We need not be afraid! Let us open ourselves to the light of the Lord, he awaits us always in order to enable us to see better, to give us more light, to forgive us. Let us not forget this! Let us entrust this Lenten journey to the Virgin Mary, so that we too, like the blind man who was healed, by the grace of Christ may "come to the light", go forward towards the light and be reborn to new life.

Group Discussion

- Pope Francis said our hearts are “always closed to some degree.” Who or what have you closed your heart to? What can you do today to open your heart to the light of Christ?
- What is your “takeaway” today? What stood out to you? What challenged you?
- In the week ahead, how can you apply what you heard today to your life and your interactions with others? What can/should I do differently this week?

Closing

- At different times in our lives we all experience varying degrees of blindness - in our work, in our relationships, and in our faith. Sometimes it is unintentional. We get caught up in the busyness of life or the oppressive bombardment of our culture and are unaware of the veil that slowly grows thicker around us. And sometimes we make a conscious choice to turn a blind eye - towards others, towards our own failings, towards God. We must turn in humility back to God, so there may be light in our darkness, sight in our blindness.

- Scripture verse (John 9:39)

Jesus said,

"I came into this world for judgment,
so that those who do not see might see,
and those who do see might become blind."

- Closing Prayer - (St. Augustine)

O Holy Spirit, Love of God, infuse Thy grace,
and descend plentifully into my heart;
enlighten the dark corners of this neglected dwelling,
and scatter there Thy cheerful beams;
dwell in that soul that longs to be Thy temple;
water that barren soil, over-run with weeds and briars,

and lost for want of cultivating,
and make it fruitful with Thy dew from heaven.
Amen.