

Church of the Good Shepherd  
and  
St. John the Evangelist

Week 6 The Parish Project  
October 21, 2007  
Fr. Bill McGinty

**“To Seek to Grow in the Love of God”**

Welcome to the sixth and last of our Wellness Liturgies in the Parish Project. The theme this week is: “To grow in the love of God”

“To love God you have to know God.” Last week, a man came to see me seeking counseling. He is a good man, kind, wise, intelligent and successful in his business. He tells me that his problems have become too much for him to cope with alone. His son went off to college and became addicted to drugs. He dropped out and now works as a barman in the city. His wife has breast cancer and is involved in heavy and constant treatment to save her life.

There is strength in this man, and obvious pain, but then he told me, “Father, I think of myself as religious. Basically, I am a Christian, but I have never been able to pray. I’ve always known this. O, I believe in Jesus and all the tenants of faith. I even envy people who do pray, I just have never been able to do it.”

I hear this a lot. Often it revolves around the fact that people have difficulty worshipping a God that they cannot see. They need to put skin on the face of their God. They need something tangible. I suppose it’s a natural feeling and reaction. They say that Mother Teresa the great Apostle of Calcutta, had a vision of God in the 1960’s. It was an experience that was so powerful that it stayed with her for the rest of her life. She left her Ursuline convent in India and founded her own order to work among the poorest of the poor in the streets of Calcutta. She never had that experience again and it drove her to despair. She was unable to find God in prayer for the rest of her life.

Asked about God she told people that God had deserted her. She felt as lost as the children she picked up on the streets of Calcutta. “Today, I found a little boy of three: she said, “He was dirty and sad, lost and alone and hungry. I took him into my arms and gazed into his eyes and a voice in my head said: “Teresa, Teresa look into the face of your God.”

Teresa’s experience of emptiness in prayer is something we all experience from time to time, but that does not give us permission to give up. We are all invited to grow in the love of God.

For most of us we meet our God, on a daily basis, in the faces of other people. Somehow, in that tangle of souls and problems we touch a spirit that at times brings out the best in us.

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You see we are involved, are we not, in a whole ongoing campaign that we Christians call salvation. Personally, I think of it as a war that we wage that never ends. O, it will have its quiet moments, but it will also have its gigantic battles. To this struggle we bring every resource that we can muster. Even in **lulls**, we are resting, recuperating, gathering and planning for how we Christians can defeat ignorance, prejudice, evil, disorder, discord, injustice and inequality.

If I reach for my Bible I am looking for strength, re-assurance, forgiveness and more often ideas, concepts-initiatives forgiveness and courage.

I switch on the television, read the newspaper and check the computer and I am sent reeling from the assaults of the secular world, unbelievable and pagan values. At times, it seems that we are losing this war and its then that I seek the prayer of my God. Cancer, aches, disease, war, child abuse, and corruption could all point you towards despair and even depression. Its then that I remember the words an old priest told me in 1973. He said: "Prayer is 95% listening."

Think about that, prayer is 95% listening. That is an amazing statement. It means prayer is nothing we need make up. We don't have to invent it. It is there already. Someone else is talking to us. Prayer is not something we do to God; prayer is something God does to us. God is speaking. We belong to a chattering God that will not shut up. Have you heard him?

This morning on the way to church he was talking to you. Did you hear him? Were you listening for him? He wasn't talking, he was shouting.

"I have never heard God speak to me"; one of my High School students once told me, but who says our God only ever uses words? This morning God splashed all the color of the Fall across our journey to church. In the majesty and beauty of Creation he constantly speaks to us of goodness and awesome wonder. Animals and pets speak of peace, friendship and gentle ways. We have a God who communicates, our problem is that we don't pray, when we don't listen. When we don't listen, we create a vacuum between ourselves and our God.

"The earth with its store of wonders untold  
Almighty they power hath founded of old  
Hath stablished it fast by a changeless decor  
And round it hath cast, like a mantle the sea."

Yet, we should never, for one moment think of our God as anything less than awesome. Study the universe for a day and you become aware of the enormous might of God.

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It is this God, who invites us into constant covenant with him. It is this God we work for. It is this God we go to war for. Our first reading today comes from Isaiah II. We chose it because it speaks of a hope, a dream, an expectation of the coming of a Messiah, who will make all things right. He will lead us to a new Creation where peace and justice reign. "And a child will lead you."

To grow in the love of God, for us is to embrace this story of salvation. It is to belong to an ancient order with a mission. It is to hold a belief and to swear an allegiance. It is to stand under a banner, a flag that bears a cross and say, this flag is my symbol, this cross represents my Christ. I will not let it fall. I will not allow it to be defeated. Beneath it the orphan, the poor, the oppressed, the marginalized may gather, be protected and find shelter. Under this flag I make my stand and the spirit of my God will be my shield.

David in today's chosen Psalm says: "Though I walk in the midst of trouble you preserve my life; you stretched out your hand against the anger of my foes, with your right hand you saved me."

How many of us have been saved by our God? We come back to church knowing, hungering for that same encounter. The feeling we had when God stretched out his hand and touched our lives.

Paul in today's letter to the Romans knows this feeling all too well. "Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into the grace in which we stand."

What transforms our relationship with the might and the wonder of God is the fact that we attach ourselves to Christ. We shelter in his shadow. We cling to his presence. He makes it ok. It's like going to see your girlfriend's parents for the first time. You don't let go of her hand.

"Christ died for us," Paul tells us. You die only for a dear friend. In dying for us he saved us and bound us to him. That is what makes our mighty God accessible. We grow because we have joined Christ's team.

"I once was lost but now am found, was blind but now I see. He will my shield and portion be as long as life endures"

We thought long and hard before choosing this Gospel. We wanted it to speak of Wellness, Parish Wellness. It contains all you would want a church to be, diverse with many branches. Fruit bearing and being disciples who make Christ's teaching happen, but most of all it tells us that in loving one another we will grow in the love of our God.

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That concept is multiplied for us today, on this our Rainbow Sunday. It is the day we invite into our worship all who would join us in worshiping God. What ever persuasion, lifestyle or belief we throw open our doors and say welcome. In our diversity we find our strength. In our differences we have found richness. In our commonality we in this church have found new friends and companions on the journey.

I cannot think of our parish today as home, mission and a place of fellowship without Frank, Mike, Shelly, Annemarie and so many more who have added to it and given us so much.

Among them and with them in our midst, we have grown in God's love and have become a better place.

Let us in this Eucharist celebrate that love and friendship and pray that we may continue to grow in Wellness and in the love of the God who calls us to be his people.

Amen+