

2nd Sunday of Advent - December 10, 2017

I want a parish full of people who are engaged and joyful and growing in their relationship with Christ and contagious with this faith . . .

A parish that is not closed in on itself and self-absorbed, but rather a parish that is constantly searching out, inviting, and welcoming everyone into an encounter with Jesus Christ and His Church - that is, a parish in which an encounter with the Church is simultaneously an encounter with Jesus Christ and life in His Holy Spirit. A parish that truly is a community where people from the outside look and say, “wow - what do they have, because I want that!” Those people are to have an “entry ramp” of welcome, engagement, belonging and accompaniment through their ups and downs, questions and problems.

A place where the liturgy is truly uplifting, beautiful, reverent, and in accord with the mind of the Church . . . where a sense of wonder and awe, joy, and the reality of Christ’s presence is palpable.

A parish of engaged disciples who are constantly filling the ranks of volunteers for service both within and outside the physical walls of any of our worship sites.

A parish where all have a sense of belonging, which includes a sense of responsibility for the ongoing life, health, growth and vitality of the community.

That is our destination. That’s the vision - it’s where we need to go. It is, if I may be so bold as to borrow a term from Matthew Kelly, “the best version of ourselves” as a parish community. “The best version of ourselves.” In other words, God’s dream is for us. That is the vision I’m trying to put forth, and begging God for the grace to express clearly. It’s how I want us to begin moving forward - towards that destination, as individuals and as a community.

It is fair to take a look and see where we are now - and it’s fair to say that where we are now is NOT the destination described in the vision. So, if we are going to attain the vision in our community, we obviously are going to

have to move. We are going to have to set out on that journey toward the destination . . . In a word, we need to change. Things are going to be different.

We hear that as the first words of preaching in the Gospel - both from St. John the Baptist, and from Christ himself. You can look it up! In every case, in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, what we see as first words of preaching from both John the Baptist - and from Jesus Christ - is: "Repent." Repent is another word for "Change" - it means a deep change from within - a change of attitude, a change of heart, a change of priorities, a change of lifestyle, a change on every level of awareness, consciousness, and of being.

In the Gospel of Mark today, we hear it put thus: "John the Baptist appeared in the desert proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins."

What stands in the way of our changing? What holds us back from becoming what we were meant to be as individuals, as a parish? - or to borrow from Matthew Kelly once again, what blocks us from becoming "the best version of ourselves?" There are many contributing factors. Let me name just a few:

Pride/ego - "I know best, and don't tell me what I should do"

Sins - we can be ensnared in patterns or habits of sin, even trapped in them. Stuck on things not good for us - which can also be described as -

Attachments - we all have our attachments - even addictions - to things, habits, people and situations, and don't much want to change. Or

maybe we can't let them go, without God's help. Attachments are VERY much like addictions, in that we might very much want to be free of them, but are powerless to do it on our own, and we can be enslaved by them unless and until we admit that we need help, and seek it from God and others.

Priorities - we can have all kinds of mixed up priorities, putting other things ahead of God and what leads to our best selves, and we just don't see much sense or need for change - we're interested in other things .

Lethargy/inertia - In the laws of Newtonian physics, we're well familiar with "Inertia: a body at rest tends to remain at rest unless acted on by an outside force." In the spiritual life, inertia is a problem and acts in a similar way - we remain where we are, unless acted on by an outside force. We can understand that change is needed, but don't much have the enthusiasm or desire to do something about it ourselves. Another profound term from the spiritual masters on this phenomenon: LAZINESS!

Feelings of Unworthiness/Shame - God wants to do great things in other people, in other communities . . . just not me, just not us... I believe this problem is more widespread than many of us realize. "I've got baggage, skeletons in my closet." People feel a deep sense of remorse and shame about past sins, and are convinced God is not going to do much in and for them now. Listen, I have baggage, you have baggage, she does over there and he does over here . . . we can start a luggage company ourselves with all the "baggage" we have here right now! But that's why Christ came - to take that baggage, that shame, that sin, guilt, and remorse - ALL OF IT - He took it upon Himself. He really did. Can you believe that? He took it on Himself, and He offers you and me a new beginning, every day. Don't let that baggage, the shame, or a sense of

unworthiness, trip you up along the way to becoming a better version of yourself today, with the help God wants to offer you each day.

Failing to recognize that there IS such a thing as a “best version of ourselves” - This one’s somewhat related to the last one. It’s a sense that what is, just is . . . I may have a hard time seeing anything greater in store for me . . . or for us, as a parish.

Fear (lack of trust?) - I know that change is necessary, and change is happening, but I don’t have control over it all, and I don’t really know how it will all turn out going forward.

All of these are understandable, and all of these can contribute mightily to strong resistance to change (at least changing the things we perceive as a threat, or what we don’t want to see change). Resistance to change, resistance to the vision, can chain us down to remain where we are, passively allowing things to happen all around us - - - or it can lead to our taking on a defensive, maintenance mode of being: “just hold on to whatever we can retain and try not to lose too much of what we have left, looking back to what it was that we had...” But God wants so much more for us. So much more. Don’t aim too low - we are not meant for maintenance, we’re made for mission!

Again, the first word of preaching in the Gospel . . . “Repent!” Repent has a bad rap - it’s reduced often to mean only that we are awful, horrible, no-good dirty rotten scoundrels - - - and, well, sometimes that’s exactly what it means! **But**, it can also simply mean that we’re supposed to change in some way. That we’re not meant to stay where we are. God loves us too much to leave us here, right where we are. Do you believe that? You’re

meant to go places, I'm meant to go places. We're not supposed to stay right where we are - and so, "repent." Up, and move! **Our first step on the journey towards our destination, our vision, is simply acknowledging that we have a place to go, and that we are not there now.**

We must step out on our journey then - and our first step is to acknowledge that, and recognize that we have a need to repent. From sin, from attitudes that are not God's attitudes, from attachments to the way things are (in our own personal lives, as well as in our community way of thinking and acting), and so on.

I am grateful to those who joined me last Wednesday at 6:30pm at Sacred Heart for simple, humble (and mostly quiet) prayer for parish renewal. And thank you to all who joined me wherever you happened to be at that hour. We'll do it again this week at the same time and place - Sacred Heart on Wednesday evening at 6:30pm. We'll continue to pray for this renewal. A renewal that begins with humble repentance.

Repent, says St. John the Baptist. In other words, "Take your first step toward your glorious destination." Because after repenting, we make room for the One who comes, not just to baptize with water - no, He comes to baptize with the Holy Spirit.

Come Lord Jesus - baptize us anew with the Gift of Your Holy Spirit. Remove our sins. Remove our fear of change. Remove our suspicions. Remove our doubts, our shame, our sense of unworthiness. Remove it all,

Lord Jesus, so that we may become the best version of ourselves, to the glory and delight of your Father.

Send forth your Spirit once again, and renew the face of the earth . . . by renewing each one of us. Amen.