

18th Sunday in Ordinary Time – Homily

While looking at the readings for this weekend and preparing my reflection, I was reminded of a story my father told me about something he and a friend did in his younger days. Apparently, when he was all of 14 years old, he had had enough of living at home and he and his friend quit school and boarded a train bound for Montreal to begin their “adult life” there. This is hard to imagine by today’s standards, but this was 1940 and things were different then. After a relatively short period of time trying to survive in the big city, Dad and his friend came to the realization that they were in over their heads, and it was time to go home. To try and smooth things over with his mom (my grandmother) he brought her a present as he showed up on her doorstep, hat in hand. My grandmother, who always had a gift for speaking directly and plainly said to Dad, “the only reason you brought me this gift is so I will let you back in the house. It is certainly not because you missed me or are sorry.”

When the crowds didn’t find Jesus in the place where he had given the bread, they continued their search until finally finding him on the other side of the sea in Capernaum. When Jesus sees them, the first thing out of his mouth was not, “welcome”, or “I’m glad you’re here.” No. He cuts right to the chase and says, “you are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves.” It seems Jesus and my grandmother had a lot in common.

In both these stories the folks arriving at their destination immediately have their motivation for being there questioned. I think examining our motivation for doing anything is a good thing. In the last 10 years or so of my life, when asked to do anything, the first question I ask myself is, “Mark, who are you serving?” If the answer is “Mark”, maybe this is not the road to take. I can ask myself this question because, in the past, me is exactly who I was serving in

some of the things I agreed to do, and if other folks got something out of it, that was just an added benefit. The source of my energy in these times was my ego, and that source had many limits. In these instances, I found myself having great enthusiasm, but very little endurance. I think that is a common thread in society today and in our church. Over my years in ministry, I have been a part of more than one project that began with great enthusiasm, but as roadblocks came up, didn't have staying power. It just seemed easier to give up than to battle the establishment. I am currently on a committee that is working on an initiative entitled "Enlarge our Tent - All Are Welcome." What more Christian message could we be sending? As we began working on this, some questions were raised, such as, "Is everyone really welcome? What does being welcomed look like? Do we as church have room for people whose lives may look a lot different than ours? Are you really welcome if we won't allow you to fully participate? I don't think anyone would invite someone to our home and when it was time to eat, not allow them to come to the table.

We live in a world that is increasingly polarized with no room for the other. Just turn on CNN or any other news station if you don't believe me. Recently, I was on a webinar where Dr. Anne Walsh asked the question, "How do we minister to a world that is increasingly deaf? She said, "what I mean by that is we are in a world where people rely heavily on social media to form their opinions and conscience. When someone is saying something we don't agree with, we just block them or change the channel to listen to someone we do agree with." In that environment it is very difficult to bring good news. It's even harder to hear good news when you are always talking.

These divisions often go beyond just our church community or our circle of friends and can end up in our homes. For those of you who

are parents of adolescents or young adults, can you say you are always in agreement on controversial topics? It is probably naïve to think you would be. So, when these disagreements arise, how do we handle them? Because I think the way we deal with them at home will inform greatly the way we deal with them in the greater community. I grew up in a home where religion, and religious beliefs led to many broken relationships. Some of which, to this day, have not been mended. I find it hard to believe that this is in line with God's plan.

So where do we go from here? How do we listen to and love and accept people we don't agree with and not compromise our own moral compass? Let's start with what I think is the most difficult and most important step in the process. Leave judgment at the door. Just listen to this person's story and feel blessed that they trust you with it. Know that they are not looking for you to fix them or set them straight. You may not agree with them or what they stand for, but be comfortable in knowing there can be a place at the Table for both of you.

I read something recently that stressed the importance of being there for someone. To just show up. Author Jenna Kutcher says, "show up messy, show up imperfect, but just keep showing up." Maybe that's the key. I would like to share with you a story that I think illustrates what God can do if we are just open to showing up.

Marine by the bed.

A nurse took the tired, anxious serviceman to the bedside. "Your son is here," she said to the old man. She had to repeat the words several times before the patient's eyes opened.

Heavily sedated because of the pain of his heart attack, he dimly saw the young uniformed Marine standing outside the oxygen tent. He reached out his hand. The Marine wrapped his toughened fingers

around the old man's limp ones, squeezing a message of love and encouragement.

The nurse brought a chair so that the Marine could sit beside the bed. All through the night the young Marine sat there in the poorly lighted ward, holding the old man's hand and offering him words of love and strength. Occasionally, the nurse suggested that the Marine move away and rest awhile. He refused.

Whenever the nurse came into the ward, the Marine was oblivious of her and of the night noises of the hospital - the clanking of the oxygen tank, the laughter of the night staff members exchanging greetings, the cries and moans of the other patients. Now and then she heard him say a few gentle words. The dying man said nothing, only held tightly to his son all through the night.

Along towards dawn, the old man died. The Marine released the now lifeless hand he had been holding and went to tell the nurse. While she did what she had to do, he waited.

Finally, she returned. She started to offer words of sympathy, but the Marine interrupted her, "Who was that man?" he asked.

The nurse was startled, "He was your father," she answered.

"No, he wasn't," the Marine replied. "I never saw him before in my life."

"Then why didn't you say something when I took you to him?"

"I knew right away there had been a mistake, but I also knew he needed his son, and his son just wasn't here. When I realized that he was too sick to tell whether or not I was his son, knowing how much he needed me, I stayed. I came here tonight to find a Mr. William Grey. His Son was killed in Iraq today, and I was sent to inform him. What was this Gentleman's Name? "

The nurse with tears in her eyes answered, "Mr. William Grey....."

I believe when its all said and done, we are all people on a journey. One no better that the other. And like my dad years ago, we just want to go home.