

15th Sunday Year B 2009

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“Whenever you enter a house, stay there until you leave the place. If any place will not welcome you and they refuse to hear you, as you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them.”

The inspiration for my homily this morning comes from one word in this gospel passage and I’m sure you’ll be able to figure out which word that is but first I have a confession to make to you. On my vacation I went to Sunday liturgy at a local parish and I committed all the liturgical “Sins” that I know of. I arrived late. (I didn’t leave myself enough time to “get me to the church on time.” I didn’t sing. (I wasn’t in the mood for joining in song.) I only put a buck in the basket because I didn’t want to part with a \$20. (After all this wasn’t my parish.) And to top it all off I left right after receiving communion. (Now I had a good reason to do that but still...)

So for those of you who arrive late, don’t sing, only put a buck in the basket and leave as soon as you receive communion, at least I can say: I’m guilty too. So I went back the next week and I was on time for the opening. I sang full out, I stayed until the final verse of the closing hymn and I put two bucks in the basket.

Truth be told, the liturgy was very well done. The music was lovely. People sang. The lectors were wonderful. All of the ministers were obviously well-trained and committed to their liturgical role. The homily the first week was engaging enough. The second week I lost interest about 2 minutes into what seemed like an eternity. (I know what it’s like being on the other side.) I came away from the celebration thinking, this parish is making a wonderful effort to pray and celebrate the liturgy in a thoughtful and gracious manner. And yet there was something missing for me. And it’s no fault of the parish. Simply put, I was a stranger. No one knew me. I was an anonymous participant in the liturgy of the day. It mattered to no one that I was there and it really wouldn’t matter to anyone if I returned. It wasn’t that I felt “unwelcome” but I didn’t feel exactly “welcomed” either. No fault of the parish. People are invited to greet each other as we do here. There are ministers of hospitality that nod to you and say good morning. They are doing all the right things but still I went away thinking and feeling that something was missing. Yes, I had been nourished with the word, the

eucharist, but nourished with the presence of my brothers and sisters in Christ? Welcomed in as I crossed the threshold of this parish church? In a way yes, in a way no. There was certainly no need to “shake the sand off my feet,” even if I was near a beach.

The word from the passage is, of course, welcome. The question I would like to ask you this morning is: how well do we welcome as Catholic Christians? You can think of your experience here at St Ignatius, in this gathering of brothers and sisters in Christ or any Catholic church you have gone to. Generally speaking, Catholic churches are not known for their welcome. Certainly not in comparison with other Christian churches, especially the evangelical churches. When a new person crosses the threshold of the church they are considered special guests, invited to stay after the service for coffee and conversation. There are those in the community whose ministry it is to welcome, to reach out, to follow-up, to invite the person or persons to find a spiritual home, if even for a short time as visitors. They want to listen to their stories, share the ways in which they have been touched and transformed by the presence of Christ and the working of the spirit in this community of brothers and sisters in Christ.

Does that sound very “Catholic” to you? Always, Sometimes, Never? And some may prefer it that way. You may be just looking for a quiet place to pray and not be bothered by anyone. There are enough people in your life during the week. You need the spiritual experience of Christ in communion, you may appreciate the guidance you receive in a homily or from the word of God but community? Being known and recognized, belonging to and sharing your gifts, revealing your journey with God to others who are strangers? Not for me! Or at least, not for me right away. Give me time. Give me space. Keep inviting me and one day I might take you up on the invitation.

At the heart of the experience of welcome in the Catholic community is the question, “Do we know who we are as we come to share this eucharist with our brothers and sisters in Christ?” Are we even aware that the person next to you whom you may or may not know is “family”? Am I so caught up in my own world that I forget that the people at my left and my right share in the same inheritance as I do? As St. Paul says, by virtue of our baptism, by our incorporation into the Body of Christ we are blessed in Christ with every spiritual blessing. God has lavished riches upon us. We are sealed with God’s spirit as the first installment of our inheritance toward redemption as

God's own, to the praise of his Glory. Whether we've arrived late, or leave early, whether we know many or few or none at all, that's who we are. And with that inheritance comes the responsibility, or at least the invitation to respond and go beyond simply **being present** to **becoming a presence** within the community. **From being present to becoming a presence.** Why is that important? Because we are told that Christ is present through our presence to one another, in our willingness to share who we are, with our hopes and dreams, our concerns and our compassion.

Now I know what was missing from my experience of "welcome" at the parish church I went to for two Sundays in a row. I was missing. I was physically present but I would not let myself be a presence in this assembly. I crossed the threshold of the church but did not take the time or make the effort to cross the threshold of the lives of my brothers and sisters in Christ. Maybe the next time.