

Mass of the Holy Spirit September 28, 2006

As we gather here this morning to celebrate a new academic year, I come to you not as a theologian, nor as an intellectual, but as a friend and colleague; as a person who searches constantly for meaning in his own life and as one who struggles to understand his relationship with God. While somewhat reluctant to share my reflections on the readings, as a friend once told me; you should never pass up an opportunity to take the pulpit as a lay person. Having grown-up in a traditional Irish Catholic family who believed resolutely in the 45 minutes Mass, I'm mindful of what my uncle used to say about the homily; "If it can't be said in 10 minutes or less, it ain't worth saying because no one is still listening." I will do my best.

That said, it is a privilege and an honor to have this opportunity to say a few words to the students, faculty and staff of Seattle University in this historic church on the occasion that many of us consider to be the true opening of the academic year, the Mass of the Holy Spirit.

While the Mass of the Holy Spirit marks such an extraordinary time in the academic year, it should not be lost on us that it comes at a very ordinary time in the church calendar. While our Jewish and Muslim sisters and brothers celebrate significant religious holidays, this next Sunday is the 26th Sunday of Ordinary Time in the Christian church. Ordinary Time is an important concept for me because I believe it is in the ordinary, everyday time in our lives that God speaks most clearly to us.

The readings selected for today's mass are most meaningful to me because they were given to me by a spiritual director some 20 years ago in a time of great doubt and despair in my life. Since that time, these particular readings have come to be words of tremendous comfort, strength and hope for me.

In Matthew's gospel today it says that Jesus "made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds." I've often wondered how much choice the disciples had in this move. The wind comes up, the waves batter the boat and the disciples are obviously experiencing some rough times. When Jesus comes to them on the water their first reaction is one of terror and fear. The gospel says that Jesus spoke to them immediately saying, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid."

Peter responds by saying, "Lord if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." Jesus says, "Come" and Peter gets out of the boat and begins to walk on the waves toward Jesus. The gospel implies that he is doing quite well until he becomes aware of his surroundings, starts to freak out, and begins to sink. He cries out for the Lord to save him and immediately Jesus reaches out to grab his hand. Jesus then says, "Peter, you of little faith, why did you doubt my presence?"

My brother Kevin likes to say "take heart/have faith in difficult times, Jesus never gives you burdens you can't handle." There have been times, however, when I have doubted

this, times when I have felt frightened and alone. But our Gospel today challenges us to keep the faith, to stay focused on what matters, and to reach out to the Lord, knowing that God will always be there to grab hold of us, to support us in our troubles and to lead us to a more loving, peaceful place.

I have listened as friends describe their experiences with the most devastating of times (serious illness, death of a partner or a child). Those who have reached out and walked with Jesus through these desperate times often talk about arriving at a new place, one of tremendous healing, love and peace. In my own times of doubt and despair growing up with an alcoholic father, struggling with my own internal demons, and the near loss of a child, I have actually extended my hand to God and felt not only God's embrace but God's love and peace flow into me as well.

When I hear this Gospel story I'm always struck by how Peter tends to be chastised for his lack of courage and faith. However, in recent years I've come to see Peter as a person of tremendous courage. It is he, after all, who is willing to climb out of the boat while all others cower in fear. It is he that takes the risk to reach out to the Lord in the midst of so much chaos and confusion.

There are times when I imagine Seattle University as a boat afloat in a turbulent world. As diverse as we may be here at Seattle University, we are all in the boat, dedicated to creating the kind of learning experiences that challenge our students to attain the knowledge, competencies and values needed to make the world a more just and humane place.

That said, for me it is important to think that what happens outside of the boat/institution provides an essential link to the learning that takes place inside. In other words, in order to gain the knowledge, skills, values and perspectives needed to make the world a better place, I believe we must step out into the swirling seas of our diverse, increasingly interdependent, broken world.

Fr. Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, S.J., Superior General of the Society of Jesus, says that colleges and universities have a unique role to play in helping a generation of students to experience a "personal involvement with the innocent suffering, injustice and degradation in our world, for this action is the catalyst for solidarity which gives rise to intellectual inquiry and moral reflection."

St. Ignatius of Loyola speaks to the importance of Jesuits becoming "contemplatives in action." Of not only spending time in prayer and reflection, but engaging the world around us. Ignatius says that it is by engaging these "dynamic creative tensions" that we come to know profound truths."

In his opening convocation speech last week our president, Fr. Steve Sundborg, encouraged us to become "Jesuit in a New Way." A basic premise of his talk is that we are all (students, faculty and staff) called to be leaders of this 450-year tradition of Jesuit education, not just the Jesuits. We are all challenged to be "contemplatives in action."

Not unlike the challenge to our students, we the faculty and staff must also find ways to expand our comfort zones, open ourselves to new learning, and get involved in the gritty realities of life beyond the university that will bring true meaning, keen insight and increased relevance to our discipline/our work.

Why step out of the boat? James Baldwin encourages us to do so because “each one of us hopelessly contains the other.” Sr. Helen Prejean, of Dead Man Walking fame says that “our tendency to separate ourselves from the world around us makes it possible to do almost anything to one another.” Cornell West puts it this way, “we will either hang together or hang separately.”

Isaiah’s take is that we do so because the Lord has called us to do so. He states “the spirit of the Lord God is upon us, the Lord has anointed us; God has sent us to bring good news to the oppressed...” Would God have anointed us to lead and serve if he didn’t think we were capable of making a difference in the world?

We often ask our students how many of you consider yourselves to be leaders? On average about ½ raise their hands. When we ask those that didn’t raise their hand about why they do not consider themselves to be leaders, they point to all kinds of reasons (wasn’t involved in high school, not much of a public speaker, don’t really like to get involved, not very confident in my abilities, I’ve got nothing to say).

However, in our second reading from Corinthians today Paul suggests that God is not just calling those who appear to “have it all together.” Quite the contrary, he suggests that it is those who struggle, those who know pain and suffering in their lives that in fact have a special calling to step out, to lead and serve in the world.

The reading from Corinthians says “three times I appealed to the Lord to rid me of my torment,” yet the Lord said “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness, for when I am weak, then I am strong.”

It is my belief that those who know pain, suffering, alienation may in fact offer the kind of leadership we need most to heal a broken world. If we know what it means to struggle with illness, violence and injustice, I submit that we are more likely to include and to be transformed by the voices of those most disenfranchised on our campus and in our society and, therefore, more likely to design just and humane solutions to the problems of our world.

Parker Palmer asserts that “a true education must be one that calls the student forth to expand her/his comfort zone to enter into relationship with others often quite different from themselves and to develop a capacity for connectedness with the world and its people.”

Bell hooks concludes that “when education is the practice of freedom, students are not the only ones who are asked to learn.” She suggests that “engaged pedagogy challenges

faculty and staff to take risks, to be vulnerable, to see them selves as both teacher and learner in a journey with their students which leads to new ways of knowing and doing.”

The poet & writer Benjiman Saenz is fond of saying that “our failure to solve the most entrenched issues of our time such as poverty is nothing more than a failure of our imagination.” If this is true, what might we be able to do about other daunting issues of our time if our efforts are impeded only by our failure to imagine a better world?

Without question there are risks in stepping out into and more fully engaging our broken world. The writer physician Anton Chekhov suggests that “the happy person is at ease only because the unhappy ones bear their burdens in silence, and if there were not this silence, happiness would be impossible. But is happiness really what we are all about?

- We live in the most affluent country in the world yet 20% live below the poverty line and have no health insurance
- The USA has the highest rate of infant mortality among developed countries
- We spend more money in one day on wars in Iraq and Afghanistan than we do on most social and educational programs in this country in a year
- Thousands die every day in the world of curable diseases
- In some African countries 1 in 5 people are infected by the AIDS virus.

Efforts to more fully engage others, particularly those most in need & voiceless in our society, may make us uncomfortable, may cause us some degree of pain and suffering, yet may also transform our ways of thinking about, imagining and acting in this world. As the Jesuit Volunteers say the experience may “ruin us for life.”

In this new academic year I wish each one of us the courage to “step out of the boat,” to expand our comfort zones, to complicate our thinking, to embrace dynamic tensions knowing that God has anointed each one of us to do so in his/her own way. I encourage us to take these steps as a campus community knowing that God’s firm and nurturing hand is always extended to us with the promise of much love, hope and peace.

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