

011407 2nd SUNDAY IN OT

Peace be with you. An Irish priest that I know says that all stories are true – and many of them actually happened. So – listen to this story: Here at our parish, a little boy was given a five-dollar bill to put into the collection. At the offering of the gifts, the basket came around but he didn't put the money in. After Mass, this little boy came up to me and gave me the five dollars. I was most surprised and I asked him, "Why are you giving me this money? Why didn't you put it in the basket?" And he answered, "Because mommy told me you're the poorest preacher we've ever had!" Ouch! Oh well, that mother – and you all are stuck with me today!

I want to start off the homily today with a couple experiences that still resonate in me spiritually. I don't know what you will think about these when you hear my words.... please bear with me. I hope to tie all of this together into one theme as I move along.

Last June, I went to Franciscan University in Steubenville, Ohio for the priest and deacon retreat and conference. It was my second time. I can't tell you how powerful and moving it has been in my life and ministry. So, here is story one from Steubenville: On the opening night, there is prayer, music and singing, Scripture and a speaker. At the close of the first evening, priests are invited to turn to other priests and they are encouraged to take turns hearing each other's confessions. Music plays quietly and then, priests who are willing, go and stand around the sidewalls of the auditorium and hear confessions of other priests and deacons.

Deacons, of course cannot hear confessions. I have seen men -- priests and deacons moved with emotion. It was so powerful to have upwards of perhaps two hundred or more men start this event with clean slates. I still remember the very words and spiritual coaching of the priest I went to Confession to there. I never saw him before – I may never see him again. His words are like a lingering spiritual gift and challenge. It was awesome.

Please remember that story experience – and here's story # two. Thursday night is the last night of that conference and it is open to the community at large. So we went from 250 priests and deacons to possibly a 1,000 people – jammed into this auditorium for prayer, praise and worship music and a great speaker. Finally – the evening ended with dozens of priests and deacons and even laity who have experience in direct, hands on prayer ministry. You pick anyone standing around the walls – you could tell them about some personal need or illness or problem you face – perhaps some sin that sticks with you -- and ask the person to pray over you.

With no exaggeration at all – I must have seen 75 or 100 people who were slain in the Spirit. Do you know what slain (or rest) in the spirit means? It means that someone lays hands on your shoulders or your head – they begin to pray for you – and if you are gifted with rest in the Spirit – you fall to the floor and you may be 'out' for 3 or 5 or 7 minutes... Not to worry – there are people who stand behind you and they gently lower you to the floor.

People who have experienced being slain in the Spirit tell me they never.... never expected it... and they describe it as the most blissful state of love and peace that you'll experience this side of eternity. Okay – now some of you may be skeptical. But I've seen this happen down at the Christ the King chapel in Denver – I've seen it in Ohio several times... so I'm here to attest that this can happen... Now let me leave these two stories and move into today's readings – and at a particular point, I'll return to these two seemingly unrelated stories.

Sometimes – we Christians struggle with what it means to have relationship with God. We get it perfectly backwards! We think we have to do things to please God... to impress God... to get God to love us... to get God to share His gifts with us. This attitude – this way of thinking is completely un-Biblical.

If we look at the beautiful, lyrical reading in Isaiah, God speaks to us today... right now He is speaking to us: "I will not be silent... my love for you is the love I had for Israel.... And now you who sit here at Mass today – you are my new Israel... I want you to be my espoused. For I see you not as you think you should be... for no one here is as they should be.... I see you, my beloved for what you can be. And I have always loved you... I love you now.

The Cana wedding feast is the fulfillment of Isaiah. This is the proof that Christ came to bless the notion of marriage and intimate union.

We just heard words from John's Gospel concerning the wedding at Cana – that biblical section starts off with these words, "On the third day, there was a wedding in Cana." Third day – those words are Christian code: they mean resurrection – a new beginning... a new intimacy and relationship. If we are open up to a marriage-like union with Jesus, He invites us to a new and eternal life. He is prepared to shower us with wedding gifts.

Now here is a new view of what the Cana event can mean for us. If we see sin in our lives as that which deprives us of joy and union and intimacy with God – may we not see sin as being the same as the effect of the wine running out? In those times – weddings went on for days. If you ran out of wine at a wedding, you came to an end of joy and celebration. If we say no to sin, we say yes to marriage with Christ. And then joy and enthusiasm – new life is resurrected.

Okay – sounds nice, Deacon Tom. How do I start to enter into this sort of a holy union with Christ? Here's the struggle of our time. Too many attempt to live Christianity on their own terms. They sort of want to enter into a marriage with God – but only if He will agree to a pre-nuptial arrangement in advance.

"I'll come to Mass on Sundays – I'll try to get there on time... I hope the priest or deacon doesn't preach so long that the Mass is more than an hour. You know how busy I am.

“Please don’t expect me to get involved in the parish.... Please don’t even think of suggesting that I should get active about poverty or abortion or immigrant rights issues. I really don’t think I need to contribute any of my money to the church – they have enough.” Too many folks remove pages of Scripture and reduce Christianity to what they ‘feel’ comfortable with.

Here is the challenge of my message today: ***“An intimate union with Christ is not built upon a personally derived, marginally informed, comfortable feeling.”***

Now – let me get back to the two stories I started today’s homily with... We all know that marriages most often involve gifts. And as a priest said right here at this ambo some years ago, “God is no piker.” He comes loaded with gifts for those who enter into an intimate and holy union with him.... For example – He gave us the Church as an important gift... The Church is empowered to restore the wine in our wedding feast with Christ. Through Reconciliation, the Church helps us to remove the effects of sin in our lives. And we don’t just wish away sin by ourselves... we remove sin through the gift and Sacrament of Reconciliation. I can attest to how it resurrects the spirit in us – and it brings us back to joy in a renewal of the wedding feast.

In the reading from St. Paul – we heard, “Brothers and sisters: There are different kinds of spiritual gifts...” **Do you believe that?** God is loaded with gifts for those in union with him.

To one is given the gift of healing.... to another, mighty deeds; to another, prophecy and speaking in tongues.” These are the inspired words of Holy Scripture. Do you believe? I have heard a woman uttering prophecy. I have witnessed people speaking in tongues.... Not once but many times... here in this community, and in Denver, – and in Ohio. I have witnessed someone who had an evil spirit lifted.

These are but the tip of Almighty God’s table laden with gifts... not the gift of ‘everybody gets along’ like Rodney King asked for.... Not the gift of everybody being independent and deciding about what makes him or herself comfortable or happy. God’s gifts are important ones -- the gifts that stir us – rouse us -- draw us into an ever holier, intimate, marriage-like union with Christ Himself. The prophet Isaiah expresses the conviction that God wants to marry his people, which is to say, to be intimate and to share his life fully with them.

Come – let us share in another gift – it is about to be delivered to those who are truly espoused to Christ – the good wine of Cana will now become the gift of the ‘good wine’ of the Eucharist. In this manner, those who receive properly will become intimate with Jesus – will become partakers of God’s inner life. Come Lord Jesus, share with us the new wine of union with you.