

My friends in Christ, as our Parochial Year For Evangelization continues (and our summer homily series “Unleash the Gospel” as well), we encounter a Scripture text today from Saint Paul’s Second Letter to the Corinthians. Now, the people of Corinth were rather notoriously difficult for Saint Paul. While converts in *other* cities where he established the Church were fairly welcoming of his evangelization and his presence among them, the Corinthians were actually fairly hostile; and so because of this, he was, in a particular way, especially attentive to and mindful of his mission there.

For example, we know that he wrote four letters to them, two of the four having made their way into the canon of Sacred Scripture. And we know that he also visited them in person on *several* occasions as well. And being a faithful missionary disciple of Jesus Christ, Saint Paul had the entire Mediterranean world as his mission field – the whole of the Roman Empire.... Yet all the same, he devoted so much of his time, his energy, and his very *self...to them....* And certainly he *struggled* with them. With regard to the Corinthians, for Saint Paul, evangelization was *hard*.

In today’s text, Saint Paul speaks of “a thorn in the flesh” that tormented him, “an angel of Satan.” Harsh words indeed. We wonder what exactly this was. Maybe a physical ailment? Maybe a particular temptation or sin that kept plaguing him? Maybe it was a particular *person* – someone in the midst of the Corinthians who saw fit to go completely out of his or her way to make life just so utterly difficult for Saint Paul, thwarting his every effort to evangelize and unleash the Gospel.

In any event, this thorn in the flesh clearly was a severe enough hindrance for Saint Paul and his missionary efforts that he devoted an entire section of this Letter to discussing the matter; and it clearly was a bother – maybe even to the point that he was becoming just downright bad at what he was doing in trying to evangelize...maybe even wanting to give it all up completely.

Perhaps we can ponder for a moment why *we* sometimes, as a parish, as a Church universal, are often perceived as being just so *bad* at evangelizing...why *we* may not ever even *try* to evangelize in the first place. It seems that part of why we seem to struggle at evangelizing is that we somehow have lost the sense of mission that was the hallmark of ages past. When once there was missionary disciples embarking on mission to all corners of the earth, planting the battle standard of the Cross, proclaiming the Gospel, suffering and even *dying* in glorious witness to Jesus Christ, inspiring many countless souls to be converted and thus received into the family of faith that is the Church...now, we do not seem to have hardly *any* of that going on. We seem timid now, unwilling (even *afraid*) to stick our necks out, hiding the light of Christ that had been entrusted to us at our Baptism – hiding it under a bushel basket; and all the while content with just keeping our faith a totally private affair, even from our own *spouse*, our own *children*, our own *priest!*

But we remember what Jesus said about the Kingdom of God being like a mustard seed: it is the smallest of all seeds, but when it sprouts and grows, it becomes the largest of shrubs. Notice

that the Kingdom (and our faith *in* the Kingdom) *begins* like a mustard seed...but it does not *remain* thus; rather, it grows, branches out, gets huge, and changes the lives of countless many.

Perhaps part of the problem is that we of the modern West have totally bought into the lie, the fundamental religious error, of the Enlightenment, that religion is a private affair and therefore that we must not bother anyone about our faith or about their *lack* of faith. The Enlightenment as well as those misguided proponents of it still keep trying to tell us from their cushion lounge chairs in lofty ivory towers that religion and faith are solely a matter between man and his Maker – a most *private* concern had exclusively between a person and God...that religion and faith are only a matter of individual conscience. But this *totally* ignores the fundamental truth of the human condition that we are a *social* creature, that we are not nor were ever meant to be purely individualistic. Simon and Garfunkel were wrong; I am *not* a rock, I am *not* an island!

The privatization of religion has deeply wounded us and our evangelical zeal. But there are still other wounds that have injured us, have hindered our missionary efforts. For one, we seem to have become a society whose hero is Pontius Pilate and whose slogan is the infamous question that Pilate asked Jesus during His Passion: “What is truth?” Widespread doctrinal and moral confusion in the Church and amongst Christians have led us either to fight with each other as if both sides of an issue could be correct (abortion is wrong; no, abortion is *not* wrong – battle royale!), or it has led us to dismiss all truth altogether as if truth is merely a matter of personal sentiment (what might be true for *you* might *not* be true for *me*). Why in the world would we expect anyone to want to join us when we cannot even agree on the plain and simple fact that there *is* truth and that some things *are* simply black and white after all? I mean, I would not want to cheer for the Mariners if they cannot even agree that the sport that they are playing is baseball! (What might be baseball to *you* might *not* be baseball to *me*. Ridiculous!)

There are so *many* things that hurt our evangelical zeal, hindering our missionary efforts, that it is no wonder at all why so many of us seem to have just given up altogether, hanging up our spurs and letting someone else, *anyone* else, take care of it. And sadly, this gives rise to a variety of reasons why we simply do *not* evangelize at *all*. We already considered some of the things that hurt us when we do try to unleash the Gospel, hindering our efforts whenever we bother ourselves actually to *try*; and there are reasons why we simply do not even try at all.

Cultural Catholicism, as if the fact that we just happen to be Catholic was merely a matter of chance, something into which we just happened to be born...but not something to which we hardly even give much thought. Why am I Catholic? Because my parents are Catholic. Okay, but why do I *remain* Catholic? I may encourage each of us to take that question to prayer and really to think on why we actually choose to *remain* Catholic. And if we can think of no reason why...then why not?

Contrary to cultural Catholicism is the striking reality that some of our very best evangelists are Catholic *converts*, because they actually know their faith and live their faith through-and-through, because they have learned their faith and have fallen in love with their faith. And that all happened by and large in the context of RCIA (Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults) – which is why when I was in Chewelah I encouraged *all* of my parishioners to join RCIA, not just those people aiming to join the Church at Easter, so that *all* of us together might learn (and perhaps *re-learn*) our faith and thus fall in love with our faith all over again. And I encourage all of us *here* at Saint Peter to do the same. And we here at Saint Peter enjoy having so many things going on all throughout the year to help us to grow as disciples of Jesus Christ: Family Faith Formation; our parish retreat coming up this fall at the Immaculate Heart Retreat Center; our youth group and religious education program for children; Bible study; book study; social outreach projects; and so much more!

Another reason why perhaps we simply do not even try to evangelize is that we (and I most certainly include myself in this statement) tend to *overly-rely* on the Sacraments. The Sacraments are powerful, no doubt about it; and they are absolutely necessary, that is true. Because they are, for us, conduits of God's grace. But they are not evangelical tools. We need to speak of the Lord to folks, share Christ with them, talk to them about Him, because we need to try to show them (through our words and our example) *why* Jesus and His grace are so important. It makes no difference whatever if we lead a horse to water if the horse has no clue why water is so important in the first place. Just so, it makes no difference if we lead someone to the Mass or the confessional or the baptismal font if we never even bother trying to tell them and show them *why* Jesus and His sacramental graces are so important in the first place.

But then, once we *have* led them to the Sacraments, we *overly-rely* on the Sacraments to keep them sustained in the faith with no help from us: our people in RCIA are received into the Church at Easter, and boom – we leave them alone to their own devices; our children receive Baptism, then first (and, sadly, sometimes *only*) Confession, then receive Confirmation from the Bishop, and at the last receive First Communion...and then, what, we pull them out of religious education and as they get older never encourage them to serve at the altar, or serve as lector at Mass, or sing in the parish choir, or attend youth group...and then we wonder why they do not practice the faith as adults. As if it is all just one great big magic trick. Presto-chango! Drop off a kid, pick up a Catholic!

We need to *accompany* them, through and through. And lest we forget, we ourselves stand to *gain* something too when we seek to *give* to them through accompanying them; as we know from the beautiful prayer of Saint Francis, it is in giving that we receive.

Alongside our over-reliance on the Sacraments: we overly-rely on Catholic Social Teaching, as if donating for the poor or serving at House of Charity is all we need to be fully and authentically

Catholic. But no. Just as preaching our faith without practicing our faith is no more than armchair moralizing, so practicing our faith without preaching it is no more than governmental social work.

Now it *is* true that an important aspect of faith and evangelization is social welfare. Feeding the hungry, housing the homeless, bringing justice to the oppressed – all of that is good and cannot be neglected. All of it is indeed a powerful witness to the authenticity of the Catholic message. But just doing *that*...is *not* enough. We need to give people the Bread of Life as well as a sandwich. But sadly, many Catholics would never dare *whisper* even a single word about their faith; and yet they are busy in the soup kitchen. Soup kitchen is good; actively sharing the faith is *also* good, *and* necessary.

But in the end, what hurts our evangelical zeal, what hinders our missionary efforts, or what keeps us from trying *anything* at all in the first place...is fear. That unholy fear that tells us that Jesus does not want what is good for us. Fear is a powerful force...a destructive force. Fear wounds and brings grave injury to *each* of us, to *all* of us as Church, in a variety of ways.

Fear destroys vocations. A young man or woman will fear rejection, accusation, loss of their cherished independence. Fear shows them unfaithful priests, unhappy religious sisters, marriages in varying states of brokenness and dissolve. And fear tells them that *this* is the norm...and our young people are left wondering why even bother discerning a vocation, *any* vocation, in the first place?

Fear destroys the liturgy. “Father, make your homilies more entertaining! The church choir needs a drum set because that is what LifeCenter has! We need a barista in the narthex because that would be so awesome to have coffee during the Mass to keep us awake!” We fear a liturgy that may actually require us to be still and silent for once in the midst of a hectic world, for we fear that being still and silent means getting nothing out of the experience...and we fear that people will leave, that we will be viewed as irrelevant, antiquated, outdated, out of touch.

And fear destroys evangelization. We are afraid of rejection, of trying yet failing, or having a lack of knowledge and of allowing our lack to be exposed to our shame. We fear stepping out apart from society, “rocking the boat,” “stirring trouble,” name-your-cliché. Because to evangelize in the Name of Jesus is to be bold in daring to say that what the world offers is not enough...because it *is* not enough. And the world *hates* being told that. And so, yes – we *will* be exposed to rejection and ridicule and the world’s hatred and the devil’s ire – and no wonder then that we are afraid.

But listen one more time from Saint Paul, and let this conclude our reflections today. In his frustration with this thorn in the flesh, he “begged the Lord about this, that it might leave” him; but God said: Be not afraid; “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.” It is when we are weak...it is when we are afraid...that, by God’s grace, we are made strong. The love of God overcomes our hurt and hindrance; the Holy Spirit’s gift of Fortitude shatters our chains of fear...and we ourselves are then freed and thus are empowered to help others to know the Father’s

love and to receive the gifts of the Holy Spirit when we evangelize...when we speak of Christ with others...when we unleash the Gospel...and thus inflame the world entire.