HOMILY FOR THE 21ST SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

Cycle B

August 23, 2015

Have you ever bolted? Got out while the getting was good – before what you believed was going to be a big loss, a disaster of some sort actually happened? Have you ever done this only to find that in your discouragement you had left too soon -- before the good thing happened that you had given up on?

Seeing all the hype about the upcoming football season led me to remember something that happened at a Marion Catholic football game many years ago. Marion Catholic had a chance to make the playoffs – something that hadn’t happened for over twenty years. And many of us really believed that the guys could do it. But they had already lost two games. And we were playing Troy Christian – a team that had beat them badly for the past two years. Well it was a hard fought game. But with less than a minute left, Troy Christian scored and went up 20 to 14. And you could see the people in the crowd deflate. Before the extra point was kicked, some started heading for the parking lot muttering, “It’s all over. I knew they couldn’t beat that team.”

But the rest of us hung in there, determined to stick with our guys to the bitter end. But it was not a bitter ending. Troy Christian kicked off and the ball went to our second string running back who really didn’t get to play all that much. Well he caught the ball and started running. In all my years watching football, I’ve never seen anything like it. It was like the parting of the Red Sea. He ran straight down the middle of the field untouched, all the way to the end zone, for a touchdown. We kicked the extra point, time ran out and we had won 21 – 20. And someone near us in the stands said, “I knew this was our year.” And it was. We did make the playoffs that year. Sadly, the people who had bolted missed out on the joy of that moment.

Of course, there are far more important things that people have bolted on. In the history of our nation, we know that during the American Revolution, in those dark, cold winter days at Valley Forge, droves of soldiers lost faith in their commander George Washington and bolted. And so they were not part of the great victory that was to come.

Something like this happened in our gospel today. We were told that after Jesus spoke the words we heard for the past three weeks about him being the Bread of Life many people bolted on him. Some, undoubtedly, because they were frightened by the growing opposition to Jesus among the leaders of their people. Others left because Jesus had said things that just didn’t make sense to them. They had grown up believing that the messiah would be an earthly ruler who, with God’s help, would come and lead the people to political independence. They believed that the messiah would be a powerful ruler who would establish peace and prosperity in the world – creating a new world order.

And they had just heard Jesus tell them that he had come down from heaven (even though they knew where he was from) and that the way they would come to fullness of life was by eating his flesh and drinking his blood – by feeding on him. Some were offended by this, others just thought that he was crazy. And they couldn’t see how any good would come from being associated with him. So they bolted.

But those closest to him stayed. They stayed because they had seen the things he had done – things that were miraculous – but even more, things that showed his deep love and compassion for his people. They had seen him pray. They saw holiness shining through him. And even though they didn’t understand what he was saying some times, he spoke with an authority that left them feeling that he really knew the truth of what he was speaking. And this is just what Peter said when Jesus asked if he and the other apostles wanted to leave him too.

“Lord, where could we go? We believe that you are the Holy One of God. We believe you have the words of eternal life. And we’re sticking with you.” And sticking with him, they eventually got to the good
stuff – the good things they believed would come from following him. They experienced the resurrection and ascension and the descent of the Holy Spirit. And as they shared in the Eucharist he had instituted for them, they came to understand what Jesus really meant when he said that he is the Bread of Life.

Well, all that good stuff has been passed on to us. And it’s good to remind ourselves of this from time to time. There is nothing better than what we have here. Here we have the words of everlasting life spoken to us each week. Here we have the Bread of Life, that is, the One who shows us the way to fullness of life forever – the way of self-giving love – the way that makes lasting peace possible – the way that provides for the needs of all people. Here in the celebration of the Eucharist, this feast of love, we have something that shows us the way to the satisfying of our deepest longings and that also provides the nourishment we need to follow that way. We really do have the good stuff here.

And it is our responsibility to share it. Surely this is what’s behind Paul’s words about marriage that we heard today in our reading from Ephesians. I know that what people most often focus on when they hear his words is the business about wives being subject to their husbands as to the Lord. But Paul begins with the words, “Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ.” What Paul is really saying in this passage is that in marriage, the kind of self-giving love that puts the other’s needs before one’s own becomes a beautiful reflection of the love God has made known to us in Christ. It is what makes the married life as good as it can be. And because most people receive their fundamental formation from this union of husbands and wives, it is the best of all contexts for showing people how wonderful the way of love can be.

As Christians, this is what all of us are called to do, whether married or single. That’s what this place exists for – to bear witness to the way of love, that is, the way to the best of life for everyone. Sadly, we don’t always do this. There are moments when we don’t reflect this way of love very well. And sometimes it causes people to feel that the Church isn’t what it claims to be. Perhaps an unkind word is spoken, or a condescending glance is given. Perhaps someone is impatient or rude when dealing with others outside the walls of the church. Perhaps someone who speaks of loving one another here speaks badly of others in other places. And those who have experienced such things sometimes conclude that the church is phony or worthless and so they stop coming. Or sometimes people just get caught up with other things and lose sight of the good stuff that is here and they stop coming too.

For those of us who believe that the good stuff really is to be found here, the stuff that makes life most worth living, there is a real sadness knowing that some have left us, or in fact many have left us. We are sad because we care about them – sad because we know that we have things here that will help them to have life to the full – sad because we need them to be here with us.

This is why we have the Awakening Faith Program in our parish. And this is the kickoff weekend for it. The Awakening Faith Program is designed to help inactive or less than active Catholics renew their faith and return to active participation in the life of the Church. We are asking our parishioners to extend invitations to those they know who may benefit from this program. And we have provided invitation cards in the pews for you to take with you and give to them. So please think of someone who is no longer participating actively in the Church and pass on to them one of these invitations. Even if just a few respond it will be worth the effort. But please pray that many will respond to this invitation -- that they will come to share with us once again in the life of our church.

Fr. Rod Damico