

Unity and Community

Exodus 22:20-26
Psalm 18
1 Thessalonians 1:5c-10
Matthew 22:34-40

Today's Gospel reading is one that I frequently use during Baptisms. I recently baptized a little boy who was about 5-years-old. After I finished reading Jesus' words about loving God "with all of your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind," I asked the little boy, "Does that sound easy to you?" I expected him to say, "No," but instead he actually preached my baptismal homily for me by saying, "Well, I can't do it all by myself!"

Jesus' invitation in today's Gospel reading is a very difficult one—to love God completely—with every fiber of our being—and to love one another in the same way. This invitation naturally seems overwhelming; it seems impossible. But, as the young boy implicitly pointed out, we can live those two great commandments through the help of the entire Body of Christ, the community of faith.

Saint Paul seemed to have an amazing awareness of the importance of community. In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul expressed his desire that we "preserve the unity of the spirit through the bond of peace: one body and one Spirit, as you were also called to the one hope of your call; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all" (Ephesians 4:3-6). Such unity is brought about through awareness that all of us have different gifts that we put at the service of one another and in union with Christ. As Paul continues his letter, he defines this unity through diversity, writing, "[Christ] gave some as apostles, others as prophets, others as evangelists, others as pastors and teachers, to equip the holy ones for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ" (Ephesians 4:11-12). This is a pervasive theme in his letter to the Romans, as well—

We, though many, are one body in Christ and individually parts of one another. Since we have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us exercise them: if prophecy, in proportion to the faith; if ministry, in ministering; if one is a teacher, in teaching; if one exhorts, in exhortation; if one contributes, in generosity; if one is over others, with diligence; if one does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness.

-Romans 12:5-8

Paul obviously got this concept of unity from Christ's own example and teaching. In the Gospel of John, we hear Jesus' prayer to the Father for unity among His followers—"I have given them the glory you gave me so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may be brought to perfection as one" (John 17:22-23a).

What is impossible for you and I to live individually becomes possible through our unity as the Body of Christ, with Christ as our Head. While it's possible for us to be men and women of faith individually, the fullest expression and experience of our faith is found in community with one another. There are many ways that we can learn this important lesson in life, but I'll share with you one of my favorites.

A young man called a Catholic priest one day and explained to him that he wanted to join the parish. He told the priest that he was looking for a place to go to Mass each weekend, but that he wasn't interested in being a lector, PRE teacher, usher or extraordinary minister of Communion. He also wasn't interested in joining any of the Bible studies or prayer groups. And, he asked that the parish not send him any tithing envelopes, newsletters or bulletins. He simply wanted a parish where he could go to Mass.

The priest thanked the man for calling and explained to him that the church he was looking for was across town. He gave him the address and detailed instructions on how to get there. When the young man went there the following Sunday, he found an abandoned church, boarded up and ready for demolition.

It's not the *bricks and mortar* of a church building that helps us to live the two great commandments of love, but rather, it's our being in union with the people of God, the Body of Christ, joined with Christ our Head, and putting our gifts at the service of one another and God! This week, let's take some time to prayerfully reflect on how others people have helped us to love God more completely and what gifts God is inviting us to put at the service of others in helping them love more completely.

SUGGESTED PRAYER EXERCISE:

- ✚ Read 1 Corinthians 12:12-18. How have you experienced being "placed" by God "in the body [of Christ, the Church] as He intended" in order to help others to love Him?