

17th Sunday in Ordinary Time
July 25, 2010
Fr. Joe Bambenek
REFLECT Retreat Closing Mass

Genesis 18:20-32 Psalm 138 Colossians 2:12-14 Luke 11:1-13

Text in red was omitted for brevity

Text in green was omitted as I had been introduced at the start of Mass by Ann Tingay.

Sing: Do not be afraid I am with you, I have called you each by name, come and follow me, I will lead you home, I love you and you are mine.

It is hard to find the right words to express what it feels like to be with you here today. Well, I was not expecting that [I started to choked up during the song and then the first sentence]. I was also not expecting to feel quite so humble. Well, I messed up the plan to put your candles on a small table when I moved it before Mass and put it in the back. And then, near the start of Mass, I looked back at Ann and she had a look on her face like I forgot something. It was about two sets of prayers later when I realized the rookie priest mistake I had made in this Mass. Furthermore, as I was reading the gospel, during the part where it talks about “Do not bother me; the door has already been locked” I thought back to my first talk. My nick-name was Jet-Lagged Joe because I had traveled constantly for work. On the first REFLECT retreat, I gave the first talk, and the first song for the talk was “Leaving on a Jet Plane.” If you have flown and made it just a minute or two late to the gate for your flight, you know that they will not open the door for you. It is further proof that the airlines don’t operate according to the gospel. **As was mentioned last night during the reconciliation service, REFLECT began six years ago, through the efforts of Affectionate Ann, myself, and five other team members including a man named Scott... who is now married with two children... I mention Scott because he was the one who first raised and promoted the idea of REFLECT. At the time I was a guy headed toward seminary, working part time while taking prerequisite classes, and finding that my work in starting up the REFLECT retreat was very confirming of my vocation. Today I am a priest of 8 weeks and one day... and sitting among you are a handful of people with whom I have come to belong, and who were personal witnesses to my ordination. A tradition of becoming a priest is that during your first year, a newly ordained can say Masses of Thanksgiving at churches, etc. that have been important to him. Hence, I am here on vacation from my new parish assignment in St. Paul Minnesota (I grew up in Minnesota, lived in Michigan for 9 years for work), and I am counting this Mass to be one of my Masses of Thanksgiving. And I have also placed some ordination prayer cards on the table by the entrance to the chapel if you want to pick up one or more on your way out after Mass. OK, enough about me... let us now focus on the two themes in today’s scripture readings which jumped out as being particularly relevant to the content of the REFLECT weekend.**

When I have described the purpose of REFLECT to people over the years, my one-line summary has been that it is about belonging relationships with family, friends and God. As I look back on it, perhaps during my time on the team, we were a bit deficient when it came to the part about developing a belonging relationship with God. In fact, I have been delighted and impressed the past couple years with how the prayer aspect has been brought more into the retreat, and into the planning of the retreat. Much work goes into planning the retreat. And for recent retreats, there has been much prayer as well. It seems clear that the reason why the retreat

has flourished so as of late is because there has been so many more prayers said for it. And I hope that will continue into the future.

A belonging relationship with God begins with prayer. In fact, the first major theme of today's readings is the importance of prayer, and in the gospel we are given guidelines for prayer.

We see several types of prayer in the readings. In the story from Genesis, we witness a prayer of Abraham. To us, especially if we have a limited understanding of prayer, the reading does not sound much like prayer. But it is. Abraham is dialoguing with God, which is what prayer is all about. Abraham is implicitly interceding on behalf of the people of Sodom. Abraham is also seeking to know God more deeply through this dialogue, to understand God's love, God's justice, and God's mercy. Coming to know God better is another dimension of prayer.

In the gospel we hear perhaps the greatest instruction of all regarding prayer: when Jesus responds to the question of how we should pray. He gives us the prayer we have heard and prayed so many times in our lives: the Lord's Prayer. It begins with the humility of placing ourselves in the proper yet beautiful relationship with God: He is Our Loving Father. It then goes on to praise God, to ask for His intercession... in particular, to provide for us our daily bread... to give us today what we need, recognizing that all we have is ultimately from Him and that we are to trust Him with the future, not worry about it. The Lord's Prayer concludes with a plea for help in living good lives... lives in which His will is done... in which the freedom of forgiveness is given, and in which we are protected from temptation and sin. The prayer is written for us in a world in which there is original sin; in which His grace is necessary for us to become the people He wants us to be.

We can sometimes think that prayer is only saying a memorized prayer, such as the Lord's Prayer. While it is the perfect prayer, because it contains the essential elements of prayer, we should not limit ourselves to only praying the Lord's Prayer. The reason is simple, saying only "Our Father's" would be like the only words you say to someone you love are "I love you" and nothing else. Yes, it is essential to say "I love you" just as it is to pray the Our Father. And the words of the Lord's Prayer give us a guide for how to pray more generally. Yet for us to have a much fuller and belonging relationship with God, we should not limit ourselves just to those words. Akin to what Fr. Gordon said last night about the act of contrition as part of penance, an act of contrition that is said with words of the heart can be just as good as saying a recited prayer. However, it must still contain the same core message, that we are sorry. In developing a belonging relationship with God, we need to share our heart with Him just as we would any friend. We are to bring him our joys, and to do so realizing that He had a hand in all of them. We too should bring Him our hurts, realizing that he can do more than anyone to help them, to place the balm of healing upon them.

One of the real challenges to prayer is that we don't always receive what we want, or when we want it, when we do pray. Which can leave us doubting and wondering. While this is not the whole answer to the conundrum, if God gave us everything we wanted, as soon as we wanted it, we might come to take Him for granted. We might see Him as merely a gift machine. And we would not appreciate what we have. We would easily become spoiled children. It is not easy when we are praying and God does not seem to listen, but we do have His assurance in Romans 8:28 that He works out all things for good for those who love Him. But to understand that very we much realize that sometimes what is good is not limited to this life and to what we can see, but that the goodness can play out across eternity and or in ways that are hidden to us through the lives we touch without even knowing it. Even if we don't see it right away, God is

very, very pleased when we spend time with Him in prayer, and when we ask Him for guidance and for blessings. He will lead us, on His own time line, and in a way that is best for us, if we only persevere in asking, and then if we are faithful in courageously following where He leads us. If there is anything that my vocation can witness to, it is the joy that comes from courageously following where I would not have chosen to go on my own. In fact, it took me five years, maybe 15 years depending upon how you want to count it, for me to accept the call to the priesthood and the sacrifices it entails. But there has been such joy that has come with becoming the man God made me to be.

There is more that I planned to say, but maybe this is all that God wants said for now, so let me close.

Belonging to God does not end with prayer; instead, it also includes seeking to act like Him, since we are made in His image. With this imperative in mind, the second major theme from today's readings is God's mercy and forgiveness, with an underlying understanding of His justice.

In the story of Genesis we see this tension play out in a rather full way. God is contemplating destroying the city and its inhabitants. He would do this not out of meanness, but out of justice. We know from the letter to the Romans that the wages of sin are death. Destruction and death are the just response to sin, and apparently there is much sin in Sodom. But Abraham proposes something a bit different... that God should show mercy to the city as a whole on account of the few good people who might be there. And God agrees. We see the mercy side of God, and of His love, amidst his justice.

What is remarkable about this passage is that Sodom was not a city of the clan of Abraham. In that time, it would have been very common, if not expected, that Abraham's reaction would have been one of excitement and eagerness to the prospect of Sodom being destroyed. But instead, Abraham intercedes on behalf of the city of foreigners. Think of his reaction in contrast to the prophet Jonah... the one who preached repentance in Nineveh but then was upset when God spared the city after the people repented thanks to the words of Jonah himself. In some ways, we could consider the Abraham story to be the first example of praying for our enemies, or at least those who are not our friends. Unfortunately, though, there were apparently not even 10 just people in the city, and Sodom was destroyed after the people were given one last chance and they failed to act justly.

Yet there is a lesson for us... we are to pray for the salvation of our enemies, not for their destruction... it is completely counter to our natural desires. It is so counter because of the damage that sin can cause. In fact, you have perhaps experienced that tension this weekend. One of the parts of a REFLECT retreat that can be challenging is that in some of the early talks we are faced with thinking about wounds that we have sustained, and wounds that we have inflicted upon others, through sin. The retreat format does not do that in order to make people uncomfortable, nor is it intended to be like a reality TV show for the Team members to parade out their mistakes. Instead, the purpose of the tough talks is to open old wounds that might be festering so that they can be cleaned and moved toward healing by the rest of the weekend's content. The healing process begins with the talk on forgiveness, and then continues on today through being reminded that there are people who wish to belong to us and that we were made to make a difference. But the lynchpin of it all is forgiveness and the opportunity for confession. Because without forgiveness, it is impossible to belong to others in a world in which there is sin. A totally just, which would mean unforgiving, a totally merciless world would be a horrible, horrible place to live, and of course, there would be no hope of anything better in the next life. Yet it is often not our natural instinct to forgive.

And why is that? Part of the reason is that in the second reading we are reminded that mercy and forgiveness are not free. We have to give something up to forgive another. We have to release a claim that we have in justice against someone who harmed us. We have to forgive a debt, and when you forgive a debt you lose something... even if it is spiritually cancerous resentment. Ultimate forgiveness of sin came through the death of Jesus on the Cross. And let us remember that Jesus died, out of love, for the very people who were killing Him. Lest we find ourselves judgmental about the people who crucified Him, Jesus died out of love for each one of us, on account of our sins. He died to pay the wage of our sins. He died, out of love for us, so that we will not have to die for eternity, if we but accept His payment.

Today's gospel reading contains the words that remind us of our obligation to forgive others, "forgive us our sins for we ourselves forgive everyone in debt to us." Luke's words are not as strong as in some of the gospels. Whereas Luke followed up the words of the Lord's Prayer with the exhortation to pray, Matthew, instead, focused on the necessity of forgiveness. In his words, "but if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses." These words should inspire us to pass along the freeing gift of forgiveness to others.

After what I hope and pray has been a great weekend, a new experience of belonging, we will soon be returning to the world and circumstances that we left on Friday evening. Each of us had a choice, and for many it was a difficult choice, to come on this weekend. In fact on Friday evening, as you were driving here, I was with Scott, who was the person who came up with the idea of REFLECT and who designed the logo on the front of the music programs. He is now married with 2 children. We prayed for you and recalled how many of us had the experience of almost turning around when we came to our first retreat. I almost did it several times on my way, in fact. When we return to our life circumstances we will face many choices... but we can have a new perspective as we do so. The question for us to answer in how we live our lives is: will we take what we learned here this weekend and reach out and belong to others? Will we make the effort to belong to God through prayer, and by living lives consistent with what we believe and pray? Let us continue the spirit of belonging by being deliberate in decisions to belong to God through prayer, and to belong to all the Temples of the Holy Spirit who God places in our lives, especially by being His instrument of mercy, of forgiveness, of love, of peace, and of joy.

Sing: Do not be afraid I am with you, I have called you each by name, come and follow me, I will lead you home, I love you and you are mine.