

SEVENTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST
Proper 21

September 27, 2009 B

Mark 9:38-50

Pace e bene! It's good to be home – and to wish you the peace and goodness with which St. Francis greeted all his sisters and brothers. Pace e bene!

I return here to Greenville from my pilgrimage to Assisi refreshed and renewed – and able to see perhaps more clearly than I have in the past, how the 'dots' in my life's journey are more connected than I realized. If there's one thing in particular I bring home with me to my family, our parish and the extended community of Greenville and to our diocese, it is a deeper awareness and appreciation of God's generous and abundant gifts. I had wondered whether or not this time of year was the best time to be away from the parish, not to mention my family – but realized that it was now or never, thanks to the initiative and generosity of my brother in Christ, my mentor and Franciscan friend of more than 35 years. Father Michael Carnevale taught me by his example when I was first ordained how to become a compassionate and pastoral parish priest.

Today's gospel begins with John expressing a concern to Jesus about something he had witnessed while traveling throughout Galilee. John saw someone who was not a disciple of Jesus using Jesus' name while casting out demons – and he thought that it was wrong. He tried to stop him because the person was not a member of their group of disciples. I don't know what John expected Jesus to say when he reported this incident to Jesus, but I suspect it wasn't what John anticipated hearing. Leave him alone, Jesus seems to say. My message doesn't have a copyright. I'm here to announce the mystery of the kingdom of God – and, as a matter of fact, anything done by anyone in my name, even giving a thirsty person in need of water a drink, makes a difference.

Jesus had just finished asking John and the other disciples what they had been arguing about on the road while returning to Capernaum. (It was the text of last Sunday's gospel.) And they all became silent. They had been in such a heated conversation with one another that they didn't pay attention to the fact that he was listening to them and he knew exactly what they were arguing about. And in that moment, they probably felt embarrassed or perhaps even ashamed of themselves, for they were arguing about who was the most important among them. It was in last week's gospel account that Jesus told them 'whoever wants to be the first must be last of all and servant of all.' And he took a little child and put her in the middle of the group of his disciples, hugged her and said to them, 'Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.' In other words,

Jesus encourages and expects his disciples to be generous, and not discriminate in extending hospitality to others, especially those who are vulnerable and in need.

The theme of our Stewardship Appeal this year is “Gracious Givers” – and in the next few days, all our registered households (which means most everyone here this morning) will be receiving a mailing carefully prepared by our Stewardship Ministry Team leaders. If it appears to you when you open the envelope that there’s more ‘stuff’ in it than the expected letter, pledge card and return envelope, it’s because we’ve turned some corners as a parish family. And thanks to the efforts of our growing stewardship ministry team in collaboration with our vestry, we’ve quit talking about giving to a budget as a stewardship priority and have started talking more about what giving to God means, what growing spiritually is about - and becoming more involved members of a Spirit-led parish family. It’s why, for instance, you’re going to find in your stewardship mailing a Time and Talent Survey offering an extensive listing of ways we are involved or might consider more active participation in the ministries and services worthy of your time and talent. Please take time to prayerfully read through the listing of ways you can give of yourself as member of St. Paul’s when you open your mailing this week. For those who might feel stretched a bit in the many ways you are already involved both in the church and in so many other places, perhaps this stewardship season is a good opportunity to reflect and act upon what you may need to ‘let go’ of in order to create space in your life for where the Spirit might be nudging you to give of your time and talent to others in a new and different way. The Time and Talent Survey is by no means a comprehensive listing – and, as a matter of fact, I hope during this stewardship season to act upon some nudging of the Spirit I have had as rector for quite some time which might offer new opportunities to be gracious givers. For one, I feel it’s time to initiate a more intentional, organized pastoral care ministry for the growing number of our members unable to be physically present with us on a regular basis, if at all, but are very much a part of our parish family. Folks like Louise Guttu, Virginia Green, AJ and Jewell Ruff, Scott Luce, Rachel Stubbs, Lucia Bjorkman, Mary Edgerly, Mary Meade Powell, Carolyn Dearman and Romona Vannortwick, to name just a few, who need more than our prayers to reassure them of our love and care. They need regular support and encouragement from gracious givers willing to offer pastoral care to them in whatever way possible. And I also feel it’s time to initiate a Sunday morning transit system to provide transportation to those who would love to come to church if offered a ride but are unable to do so because of their situation.

In my return home from New York, I overheard two people sitting near me talk about literature and poetry with one another. And for some reason, I was reminded of an old movie called “Dead Poets Society” in which Robin Williams plays the role of Mr. Keating, a new teacher of English literature at a New England Prep School for boys. His passionate and creative imagination as a teacher and his commitment to his students opens the minds and stirs the hearts of his students to see new possibilities. He makes the writings of the poets real and alive and meaningful to the teenagers in his care. In a particularly striking scene, he jumps on top of his desk in his classroom and

stands before his astonished class, wondering what in the world he was doing. “Why do I stand up here,” he asked them? “I stand upon my desk,” he said, “to remind myself that we must constantly look at things in a different way. The world looks very different from up here. You don’t believe me? Come see for yourself! Just when you think you know something, you have to look at it in another way.” Mr. Keating did what the best of teachers do – and that is to see the potential within their students, the gifts they don’t realize they have within them, and to help bring these gifts to light. It’s why the Latin root words for education (e-ducare), means to “lead out.” And, along the way, it also means helping students remove the stumbling blocks preventing new possibilities the students had not considered.

It’s what Jesus, the teacher, their rabbi, did with his disciples. He continually encouraged them to look at things in a different way, especially when it came to the gift of life and their relationship with God. It’s why, perhaps, he speaks very dramatically at times, using strong metaphorical language when it came to the stumbling blocks which get in the way of accepting a more expansive awareness of God’s gracious and abundant gifts. In my opinion, what causes many of us in the church today to stumble more often than not are not sins of the flesh or greed or even selfishness, but having a narrow and restricted sense of who we are as children of God and sisters and brothers of one another in the human family. What if the hand or foot or eye Jesus figuratively speaks of tearing out or cutting off are symbolic of those things close to us in each of our lives which get in the way of our trusting and accepting God’s gracious and abundant gifts without our needing to be in control?

Am I generous or stingy, for instance, when it comes to giving of myself, my time, my talent and my financial resources as Christ’s disciples in service of others?

What do I need, perhaps, to cut off from my life that gets in the way of my being both a gracious **receiver** and a gracious **giver** of God’s generous and abundant gifts?

I’m not going to go into all sorts of examples, because it’s up to each of us to figure out what those stumbling blocks are. What’s important is that we realize that the grace of giving comes from a God-inspired generosity which helps us to look at things in a different way.

May God’s gracious gift in Christ touch and heal and lead our parish family into new and abundant life.

Pace e bene!