

5th Sunday in Ordinary Time cycle C

It was at the 6:00 am Sunday Mass at the Cathedral, now several years back. By the time we had gotten around to the Our Father, it seemed like almost all eyes were drawn to one man in the congregation, a man who was not standing for the Our Father, who had not stood for the Gospel, or the intercessions or the Creed, who had not knelt, who had not made a move during the entire Mass. If he had merely been nodding off during Mass, probably no one would have thought anything of it. If it seemed like he was simply confused about what to do, it probably wouldn't have registered. But 6:00 am is generally a pretty devout bunch, and a pretty regular bunch: a few early-birds mingled with those coming off of work or going off to work, and who just didn't ever miss Mass. And the man was awake the whole time, sitting but sort of agitated, seemed almost rather angry; and right in the middle of the congregation, and carrying himself in such a way that he had to know would be drawing attention. And, he had this look in his eyes, I had never seen a look like that before; honestly, the first thing I thought was "Satan worshipper": it was one of the scariest things I've ever seen. But what was most scary was when he got up finally, after not having budged for the entirety of Mass, and got into the communion line. Everyone was watching to see if he would receive the Host, wondering if the priest celebrant had seen anything of what we had been noticing. The man received Our Lord into his hand, and walked off. Or at least, started to. He couldn't have been a couple of yards down the aisle before somebody went right up to the priest, interrupted the communion line, and told him that this man had walked off with a Host. And you could feel the sense of relief among everybody there, when Father hurried down the aisle, and just took the Host from the man. It was a moment that shook many of us from our complacency, and awoke in us a renewed sense of who it is that we are truly encountering in this communion. The man remained after Mass, and I wouldn't leave nor would many others, until Father came in and sat down and talked to the guy, and we knew that the Blessed Sacrament was totally, completely safe there in church.

In the first reading today and in the Gospel, we see grown men, strong men, who are humbled by their encounters with God; humbled, because they understand that they, in their unworthiness, have encountered that which is utterly sacred; and it frightens them. Isaiah, terrified at his calling from God, because he laid eyes upon that which no man had ever seen and lived. "Woe is me, I am doomed!" Not just in a heap big pile of trouble, but DOOMED. He thought his fate was sealed because he had laid eyes on things which he believed should only be seen, only be known, by God. And Peter, at the end of a long and strange night, which began with a futile attempt at catching fish, and then led to this man who maybe he had seen and heard of, but whom he at this point didn't know very well getting into his boat, and teaching all these people on shore from the boat, and then commanding Peter, after his previous futile all night attempt to catch some fish, to try it one more time. And this time, it works; the fish are there now. And Peter recognizes it as a miracle. But he doesn't thank Jesus for providing his livelihood that day, doesn't ask him "how did you do that?" He says "depart from me." "Depart from me, because I am a sinful man." He

knew that he was close to something much bigger than a catch of fish. He saw in Jesus a man with power, power unlike any Peter had ever seen before: and it astonished him, and it frightened him.

Notice that Peter doesn't depart from Jesus; it's almost as if he can't run at that point. But he asks Jesus to depart from him, because fear has gripped him, just like it once did Isaiah, because he knows that he has mingled with the sacred. Jesus' words had been overwhelming for Peter. After listening to Jesus teach, he submits to what he thinks is a rather unreasonable request to put the nets out yet one more time: well okay, but the fish aren't biting tonight. But he does it anyway. And then, after this great success, he abandons it all, because Jesus says to. And in the middle of it, Peter humbles himself and says "I am a sinful man." As are all men; Peter probably wasn't a notorious sinner, but he recognized his unworthiness next to God's greatness. And Jesus doesn't say to Peter, "oh, no you're not; you're not sinful, you're okay." He simply says to Peter: "follow me." Follow Jesus, and Peter will do greater things than succeed at his trade. And do not be afraid of mingling with the sacred; for this is the reason why the Son of God became man.

Peter, without even the fullness of revelation which we all enjoy, without the knowledge of Jesus' power to overcome death, knows that he's messing with things which are way beyond him; he was not complacent about it. But sometimes, complacency does set into the Christian life, and we can use the occasional wake-up call, such as what happened that morning at the Cathedral, to remind us of who it is that we are encountering; sometimes, we need to recall our sense of the sacred. Somewhere between a fear that would prevent us from ever coming anywhere near God, much less approaching him in Holy Communion, and a nonchalance that treats communion as though it was no more significant than walking up to the counter at Arby's, is reverence: a willingness to approach God because he invites us to, yet at the same time to approach him with the respect he deserves, and with a demeanor which says we know who it is that we're drawing near to. We've had problems here at Saint Mary's lately, with Hosts not being treated properly: Hosts being taken back to the pews, shared with toddlers who don't even realize who it is that they are receiving; hosts left on the floor, Hosts carried back and then consumed. Every Host needs to be consumed right up front here, in the eyesight of the minister who distributed the Host, because this is utterly sacred: this is God, not some piece of bread. And because the priest or acolyte is busy distributing communion, it's all the more important that you, out in the pews, let us know when there's a Host out there. But it's not just Hosts being taken out to the pews; that sense of the sacred shows up in our approach to the altar. The Church encourages frequent communion, but never indiscriminate communion: it should never be an automatic decision, but always a thoughtful one, as we ponder, yes, our unworthiness, but as well our disposition: do I believe that this is the Body of Christ, and not a piece of bread; am I in a state of grace, so that the "amen" that falls from my lips isn't contradicted by the way I conduct my life outside of here? All of this is our encounter with the Sacred just as Peter encountered Jesus all night long as he

taught from his boat. Do we take his lessons to heart? Do we realize that it is not even our contrition, but the power of His Word that makes us capable of receiving the graces he offers us when he offers us himself?

“Put out into deep water and lower your nets for a catch”; even when it maybe hasn’t worked all night long; even when it doesn’t make any sense to try again this soon. Sometimes (oftentimes) God asks us to do things that utterly confound the rest of the world. The world cannot understand the things we give up out of our love for Jesus; cannot understand the tasks we take on in his name. They cannot understand why we brave cold and snow to get to Mass, can’t understand why we would sit in what appears to them to be an empty church, and just gaze upon our Lord present in the tabernacle. But even if nobody else “gets it,” we must. We still have to understand, and keep understanding better with time, what we are doing here, and who we are approaching. Sometimes, when I’m distributing communion, someone will pull their hand away just a little bit soon, or maybe a Host will cling to my fingers a bit, and I have this brief moment of fear, that the Host might fall to the floor. It causes a sensation that I can feel throughout my body, and without speaking a word, a plea to “please don’t let this happen.” Not because I think Jesus will suffer bumps and bruises, but because I know, that what I hold in my hand and communicate to others, is utterly sacred, and I am not worthy to handle him, much less receive him—and it’s not a bad thing to be reminded of that, from time to time. But, he tells us “be not afraid.” Be in awe, be reverent, be devoted, be careful, be respectful, but be not afraid of our all-holy Lord. Because it is with his holiness that he can drive out our un-holiness, and make us true disciples of his.

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