

## **Serving (November 18, 2018)**

Have you looked at the calendar lately? A question I've posed over the course of the last three weeks as we've approached the end of another liturgical year... Have you looked at the calendar lately?

In today's Gospel reading from Mark, Jesus poses the very same question, albeit in the starkest of terms. Yes, in the closing weeks of every liturgical year, the Church gives us dark readings, dark readings about end times and the final judgment. It's as if Jesus, too, is asking: "Have you looked at the calendar lately? Wake up! Wake up!"

Jesus' point, of course, is that all of us are invited to live intentionally. God loves us. He wants the best for us. God journeys with us. In the end, however, God wants all of us: our hearts, our minds, our souls, and all our strength. We're challenged, in fact, to make what some call a "leap of faith" and others a "fundamental choice." We're challenged to make a "fundamental choice" for God. Yes, God wants more. God wants all of us.

And so our extended focus on praying, serving, and sharing using a brochure entitled: "*Intentional Living: Is God Calling Me to More?*" And so our community dinner here at St. Mary's on Thanksgiving, a concrete expression of our intentional living... And so the invitation to share our commitments in terms of praying, serving, and sharing for the new liturgical year... Should you choose to participate, your commitments for the coming year will be carried to the altar next Sunday during the offertory procession. Your commitments will be carried to the altar together with the bread and wine that symbolize all of our hopes and dreams and all of our struggles and our challenges, too. Again, no names, no identification as such, and no public sharing... Instead, the anonymous commitments of intentional disciples who are trying so very, very hard to live out of grateful hearts...

Two weeks ago, a word about praying... Last week, a word about sharing... And today, a word about serving...

Serving is a challenge. Serving is a tough topic. We're challenged to serve in so many different ways at so many different moments in our lives. It's complex. How, then, to make sense of serving?

Well, let's start with Ronald Rolheiser, a wonderful spiritual writer with whom many of us are familiar. Rolheiser starts from the premise that our spiritual orientation and the spiritual challenges we face change over time.

- Our chief concern when we're young is to discover who we are. From a Christian perspective, the chief concern when we're young is to discover God's hopes and dreams for us.
- A different concern emerges when we enter adulthood, a time of life in which we can be overwhelmed by busyness. Career, family, Church... There's just so much going on, so much to be done. According to Rolheiser, the chief task in the middle of our lives is to "give our lives away" without losing ourselves in the process.
- And then our senior years... Productive years, yes, but years in which we become increasingly aware of losses of one kind or another: the loss of family members and friends; the loss of our

careers, welcomed or not; and, inevitably, a decline in health and the loss of our independence. According to Rolheiser, the chief task in our senior years is to “give our deaths away.” The chief task in our senior years is to make sense of it all. The chief task in our senior years, according to Rolheiser, is to affirm meaning in each the many steps we’ve taken over the course of our long journeys of discipleship.

Three stages of life... Three stages in the journey of discipleship...

So what, then, can we say about serving? What can we say about serving with these three stages in mind? In fact, the invitation to serve assumes very different forms over the course of our journeys of discipleship.

When we’re young, we’re invited to develop certain virtues, including the virtue of generosity. Yes, God invites young people to “more,” something “more,” in fact, than the completion of a certain number of service hours. Spiritual writers have long known that habits – good habits oriented to God – can emerge over time as virtues. Good habits – including the habit of generous service – can emerge over time as a young person’s way of way of being in the world. Yes, God wants “more.” God wants “more” from the young.

And then the oh-so-busy years of adulthood... So many demands... So much serving... The challenge? First, to avoid being overwhelmed... First, to avoid losing one’s way... How then to proceed? Two bits of wisdom in fact... Two bits of wisdom drawn from our rich tradition of praying, serving, and sharing...

The first is prayer... And, yes, the challenge is time. That’s the problem with busyness, isn’t it? Busyness robs adults of the only true compass that’s available to any of us: prayer. Overwhelming busyness robs us of the time and attention needed for prayer. And this, of course, is where praying and serving intersect in the life of the busy adult. Sustained serving – sustained serving oriented to God – requires a rich prayer life.

The second bit of wisdom drawn from our tradition concerns the Eucharist. Think about it. Busy adults compartmentalize. You’re a mom, sure, but it’s likely that you’re a daughter, an employee, a supervisor, a student, a ministry leader, a soccer coach, and this, that, and the other, too. So many roles... So much serving... And so you compartmentalize. That’s how busy adults get through the day. Busy adults compartmentalize. The risk, of course, is that we lose our way. The risk is that we lose ourselves in the maze of these sometimes overlapping, sometimes competing, and always demanding roles. And this is the point at which sharing and serving intersect in the busy adult’s life.

It’s in the offertory procession that we bring all that we are to the altar. In the offertory procession, our hearts, our souls, our minds, and all of our strength, and, yes, all of the roles we play in our very busy lives are gathered with the bread and wine. It’s on the altar that all of our serving – all of it – is sanctified. It’s on the altar that all of our serving is made holy. This is where the walls of the many compartments that define a busy adult’s life are broken down. This, in fact, is where a busy adult’s life is made whole.

And then the third stage of the disciple's journey... For seniors, the invitation to serve can flow in two very different directions. On the one hand, there's more time for serving. There's more time for serving here at St. Mary's, more time for serving your children and your grandchildren, and more time for serving in the community.

But there comes a time when serving in certain capacities becomes difficult. There comes a time when we ourselves need to be served. How to accept this graciously... How to allow and even invite others to serve in ways that can be life-changing and life-giving for them... How to turn our attention – away, perhaps, from serving – to prayer... That's the challenge many of us are experiencing or will someday experience as we age. It's all a part of the disciple's journey. God journeys with us in this stage of our life, too.

Sharing, the third way in which each of us is invited to live as an intentional disciple. Praying, serving, and sharing... The three ways in which intentional disciples live out of grateful hearts...

Our five-week journey toward the end of the current liturgical year ends next week with the Solemnity of Christ the King. If you don't already have one, I invite you to pick up one of our reflection aids as you leave Mass today. And I invite you to reflect on your commitments with respect to praying, serving, and sharing for the new liturgical year that will begin with the First Week of Advent.

For those who may be interested, we'll continue this conversation about serving this coming Wednesday at 7:00.