

29th Sunday of Ordinary Time “When God Says No”

Fr. Frank Schuster

A number of years ago, I remember a close friend of mine confiding in me how crushed he was after his girlfriend of several years suddenly broke off their intense relationship. He was grieving terribly. This was supposed to be the woman he was going to marry. I remember him telling me that he was losing faith as a result. How could God allow his life to fall to pieces like this? This was not his blueprint of where he wanted his life to go. I remember consoling him the best I could, as any friend should, sharing with him that God does not want anyone to suffer for suffering sake alone. However, it is also true that God does prune us at times, even allows us to experience the burden of the cross at times so that some greater good may come of it. He pushed back telling me he just couldn't see a good future at all. He felt like his world was ending and so all I could do is simply encourage him to be patient, have faith and trust.

Thanks be to God, a couple of years later, this friend of mine met an incredible woman, the right woman, and they fell in love. You see, the experience of the previous broken relationship helped prepare my friend for the future relationship God wanted for him all along. And it was a glorious wedding. And they now have a beautiful family together with great kids who wouldn't exist today unless life played out the way it did. Amazing, isn't it, how often God knows what is best for us even we can't see it at times?

My friends, how often in our spiritual journeys, especially during times of intense grief and loss, our relationship with the Lord can look like what we see in our Gospel reading, “Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you”? And when things don't go the way we want them, how quickly we lose faith. We have all been there, some of us more so than others. For instance, whether we suffer the loss of a job, the loss of a relationship, the loss of our physical health or the loss of our mental health, or the terrible pain we suffer from the death of a loved one; when these things happen, it is quite natural and understandable for us to cry out from the depths of our hearts to God like the psalmists of old, “Hey, this wasn't our agreement. What did I do? This wasn't supposed to be the plan, remember? When did we agree that I was going to get diabetes or cancer? When did we agree that I would lose my job? When did we agree that my spouse would leave me? We never agreed that I would suffer the sickness, decline or death of someone so close and dear to my heart. Lord, this was not our agreement. The agreement was for you to do whatever I ask of you or have you forgotten?”

Jesus responds to James and John, “You do not know what you are asking. Can you drink the cup that I drink or be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?” Remember, James and John asked Jesus if they could sit at his right and left in the coming Kingdom of God, a rather ambitious request. They didn't understand how foolish this request was. Jesus was able to look into their hearts however and see their futures. The two disciples would eventually accept the cup of suffering Jesus spoke about and endure all kinds of suffering for the sake of the Gospel. As true apostles, they would eventually understand Jesus' words and exemplify, “whoever wishes to be great among you will be your servant...for the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

At a fundamental level, however, I believe James and John in our Gospel reading represent all of humanity. It feels like, sinners that we are, we have an annoying way of always crying out to God, “We want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.” Jesus’ patient response is, “I will die for you.” “I will die for you”. That is Jesus’ response. We should remember that in times of frustration when God isn’t giving us whatever we are asking for at any given moment. Jesus’ response is, “I will die for you and raise you up on the last day.”

That is where we are going. This is the God we believe in. Growing in discipleship, however, involves accepting that when God answers our prayers, God might not answer our prayers exactly the way we expect. Indeed, when God answers our prayers, “no” is an answer too, as frustrating as that can be at times. Or as my friend discovered after the breakup of a long-term relationship, borrowing now the wisdom of Garth Brookes, “Some of life’s greatest gifts are unanswered prayers.” Can it be that our Father in heaven knows what is better for us than we do? Can it be that God’s eternal plan for us is better than what we can possibly fathom in this life?

We can ask ourselves now, what are the crosses we carry in our lives at this moment? What are the wounds that fester inside of us, sapping all of our energy and hope? What are the prayers we have lifted up to God, over and over again? How desperate we are at times for the consolation of a divine response! In the times we can’t see the good that can come in this life or the next from the tragedies that befall us, we do have reason to hope. We do have reason to trust. We do have reason to hold on tightly to our precious faith. As our author from Hebrews encourages us, let’s hear his profound wisdom again and let his words penetrate our hearts, “Brothers and sisters: Since we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast to our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who has similarly been tested in every way, yet without sin. So let us confidently approach the throne of grace to receive mercy and to find grace for timely help.” We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen.