

13th Sunday of Ordinary Time “A Spiritual Wake-Up Call”

Bishop Frank Schuster

My friends, sometimes we simply need a wake-up call. We can go through life sleepwalking, going around in circles, or just find ourselves spiritually stuck and unable to move. And then we get a wake-up call. It could be in the form of medical diagnosis that changes the trajectory of life. It could be in the form of hitting rock bottom or a moment of clarity that requires radical change in lifestyle. In terms of current events, it could come in the form of “Surprise. I’m pregnant” or “My wife is pregnant”. I only mention it because, as a bishop, it is the eleven-ton elephant in the room wherever I go these days. To be clear: a new child conceived in the womb is a completely life changing event that pastors need to be very sensitive to as we proclaim the Gospel of Life to our culture.

In the interest of brevity this morning there are statements on my parish website, St. Vincent de Paul, and my personal website regarding the Supreme Court Ruling. These statements are from the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops and the Washington State Catholic Conference for which I am a signatory. Everything I have to say is there and so I won’t repeat it here explaining why we, as bishops, pray for a day when all will recognize human life as sacred from conception to natural death and every stage and demographic in between. Suffice to say this morning, setting aside however we feel about current events right now, the times we live in have given us all a spiritual wake-up call in one form or another. A good reminder in the coming days is that Jesus also expects us to be loving and respectful to those who may be angry, upset, as we, as Church, must proclaim the Gospel given to us by God with charity and in its entirety as the Lord calls us to do.

In our Gospel reading, Jesus is giving his disciples such a spiritual wake up call. He is telling his disciples things that they clearly do not want to hear so to wake them. You see, these disciples were getting stuck in ways that were keeping them back in their spiritual development. Jesus is giving them some tough love in the hopes to get them unstuck. It is medicine we all need from time to time.

Exhibit A: we have a Samaritan village that refuses to welcome Jesus and his disciples because they were traveling to Jerusalem, a Jewish stronghold. The Samaritans didn’t like the Jews and the Jews didn’t like the Samaritans either. Succumbing to a culture of religious intolerance, James and John ask Jesus if they can call down fire from heaven to destroy this unwelcoming town. Jesus rebukes James and John because they lost sight of the mission and the whole purpose of their trip to Jerusalem. Jesus wants to save the world, not destroy it. James and John had lost their focus. Therefore, Jesus let them know.

Exhibit B: “would-be disciples” encounter Jesus on the road and say something that perhaps you or I have said to Jesus at some point, “Lord, I will follow you wherever you go”, but how quickly we sinners place conditions on our vows. Our promise to the Lord, “I will follow you wherever you go”, usually ends up,” Lord, I will follow you wherever you go provided that it is comfortable, enjoyable and on my terms.” But you see Jesus doesn’t want half-hearted

commitments from us. Jesus wants our whole-hearted and unconditional commitment. Like the Gospel today, Jesus will test us from time to time to see what our discipleship is made of.

I believe this is how to best understand Jesus' refusal to allow a would-be disciple to go first and bury his father or for another disciple to first say farewell to his family at home. Jesus isn't interested in hanging around to bury people when his mission is to destroy death forever. Jesus wants to go to Jerusalem where he will destroy the power of death through his passion, death, and resurrection. Jesus also isn't interested in people hanging around saying their goodbyes to family members. Jesus wants to get to Jerusalem where he can open the gates of heaven so there will be no more goodbyes.

At the heart of this Gospel, my friends, Jesus is challenging his disciples to wake up and get focused on the mission set before them. As shocking as this line from our Lord is, "Let the dead bury the dead", there is good medicine in this statement as well. What do I mean by that? It seems to me, in one sense, we can spend a great deal of our energy during the day walking in circles brooding over past wounds, past relationships, bad memories or experiences. It is understandable. I do it sometimes too. We can spend so much energy on these memories that we can end up becoming crippled, unable to follow our Lord into a hopeful future because we have chained ourselves to the past. Jesus tells these would be disciples, "If you want to follow me, you must first let the dead bury the dead, drop that rotting corpse you carry around in your soul, drop that corpse, let my grace help you to lighten your burden, and then follow me, not into the past, but to the future, to Jerusalem, to my cross, yes, but also to my resurrection."

Yes, my friends, Jesus is giving his disciples, and by extension you and me, a wake-up call this weekend so to get back on mission by following him to Jerusalem. This mission will include embracing the cross. Yes, it will. But the story does not end there does it. Conforming our lives to the Gospel, the destination Jesus is leading us to is not the grave but rather his resurrection, and with it, our hope for eternal life.