

28th Sunday of Ordinary Time “The Seattle Freeze”

Bishop Frank Schuster

A few years back, I was at a popular place for lunch, and I sat down at the last available table. A family came in and didn't have any place to sit down and so they asked me if they could share my table. I thought to myself, “This will be nice, I get to meet new people today”. However, once they sat down, they immediately turned to each other and started talking as if I didn't exist. I didn't get the opportunity to even introduce myself. I thought to myself, wow, look at me, I just got “ghosted”. I chuckled about it in my mind as I quietly finished my lunch imagining the number of ways that experience would be shared in a homily someday. And so, a warning to all of you. If you ghost a priest after he offers you a seat at his table at a busy restaurant, he will have his revenge...and it will only get worse once he is a bishop!

Have you ever heard of the term “Seattle Freeze”? I am not talking about a new Starbucks drink. However, it might have been a better name for our hockey team. The term Seattle Freeze refers to a social phenomenon recognized by visitors to the Puget Sound area that we tend to be superficially polite but less friendly than other parts of the country. If you try to strike up a conversation with people you don't know, you can get “frozen” out of the picture more frequently in our area than in other parts of the world. As I hear people comment on the phenomenon, I hear responses ranging from this accusation is unfair to it must be the visitors' fault. However, having traveled the world like many of you, there is a ring of truth to the phenomenon that is called the Seattle Freeze.

For example, if you ever lived in the Midwest or in the South, it is very rare that you wouldn't know everyone who lives on your block. Here in the Pacific Northwest, it is not uncommon to live a decade in a neighborhood and not know many of your neighbors. Oh, we smile at people when they walk by and wave politely at times if they wave at you. Typically, that's it. I am not saying this is true of everyone or every neighborhood, but it does seem to happen a lot. I read somewhere that there are people who blame this phenomenon on the fact that the Seattle area was founded by Scandinavians. However, this explanation makes me think, how really unfair to Scandinavians! Stop blaming Scandinavians! Some blame this phenomenon on the fact that most of the people in the Seattle area are working jobs that will only keep them in Seattle for a short time and so why invest too heavily in relationships? There may be some truth to that. Some of it may be due to the rise of technology. At most restaurants I visit nowadays, it is amazing to see how many people spend the entire time looking at their screens while they are eating, freezing everybody else out. And I am not just talking about singles in a restaurant. Sometimes there are whole families sitting together staring into their screens while they eat, freezing each other out. It is truly remarkable.

I took some time to pray about what could be at the heart of the Seattle Freeze and I wonder if a deficit of gratitude might be at work. What do I mean by that? In my mind, if we tried to be a little less self-centered as we go about our day and little more grateful for the people around us that make up our community, we wouldn't be freezing them out all the time. I also think that if we simply reintroduced the importance of saying “please” and “thank you” more often to the people around us, and to actually mean it, this could be helpful too. And so, in our

Gospel reading, ten lepers were healed by Christ, and only one came back to give thanks to God. One of them was a Samaritan, the other nine were from Seattle. The Gospel challenges us to consider at the heart of being a Christian is being a person of gratitude to God and the people around us. I think it is helpful message for us to consider.

How central is the spirituality of gratitude in our faith tradition? Well, the word Eucharist literally comes from the Greek word that means “thanksgiving”. Jesus is inviting us this Sunday to live lives that are accentuated by the virtue of gratitude, towards God and towards others. I think the Gospel reading is also challenging us to consider ingratitude as a leprosy of the soul that needs healing. Ingratitude can disfigure us spiritually and can disfigure our relationships as well. In my experience, when communication breaks down in families and it is starting to feel icy at home it is usually because there has been a breakdown in gratitude somewhere. If things are getting icy at work, in our neighborhoods and in our community, I think one of the causes of this could be a lack of gratitude in the air. If our relationships are becoming disfigured from a leprosy of self-centeredness, the remedy Jesus offers us that will cure this disease is gratitude. The remedy is gratitude.

And so, we can ask ourselves, who are the people in our lives this week that we need to be grateful for? At home, at work, in the community? Who do we need to offer thanks to? Every day we must not forget to remember to thank somebody, mom, dad, husband or wife, sister, brother, coworker, classmate, neighbor... every day we can find somebody to thank, and to really mean it sincerely rather than superficially. From those who serve us at the stores and restaurants, to our men and women in uniform who keep us safe, doctors, teachers, the list of people we can thank goes on and on!

My friends, it isn't hard. Gratitude isn't hard, we all know that...and yet, in our day-to-day routines, how easy it is to forget the most important things in life, like gratitude, especially towards God and the people closest to us. And so, Gospel readings, like the one we have today, are good reminders for us to consider every so often. Or as medieval theologian Meister Eckhart once provocatively suggested, “If you only said one prayer in your entire life, thank you would be sufficient.”