

11th Sunday of Ordinary Time “Walk by Faith”

Bishop Frank Schuster

I have been asked too many times to count why did I become a priest? The reason why I am a bishop is a far easier question to answer. I was cooking chicken in my oven and my phone rang. Frank, you are a bishop elect now. Ok. When would you like your ordination? Well, let's take out the calendar. The chicken was well done that night.

The call to become a priest is a bit harder to explain because our culture has a difficult time grasping what we mean by marriage and by holy orders. Our culture thinks of these vocations as a time of self-actualization, a social contract, a lifestyle choice and so forth. As such, people often make the mistake in thinking that the opposite of marriage in the Catholic Church is being a priest or sister. That couldn't be farther from the truth. This is because marriage, priesthood, religious life, consecrated virgins, all involve a significant sacrifice of self, and a permanent one, so to serve God and the common good in a way that the uncommitted life isn't directed to. Vocation in the life of the Church isn't until something better comes along, or a contract so long as it makes sense, it is about good times and in bad, in sickness and in health, until God calls us from this life to himself. This is a supernatural calling. It is not natural at all. It is supernatural, requiring supernatural grace.

You see, God calls. That is another thing our secular culture doesn't understand. So many people describe their faith as choosing God to be in their life, but what does that even mean? Nothing can exist without God. We are in this thing called God right now. What this all means is, it is not we who choose God to be in our life. It was God who chose us to be in his life before time began. The proof of this is our very existence. God calls; however, it is true that because we are made in his image and likeness, we must respond. And so, it is easier explaining to married couples why I am a priest, particularly married couples who have been at it for decades, because I can answer that question by asking them a question in return, when did you feel God calling you to marry your spouse? When was that moment when you “knew” you were going to say, “I do”? That's holy ground. Even for those whose vocations unravel at some point through sin or through no fault of their own, that “I do” leaves a permanent mark on the soul in a way that the universe is changed forever. If you don't believe me, consider your kids or the relationships you formed along the way. The big picture is this, no matter what happens, God always finds a way to win.

God calls. When Saint Paul says, “we walk by faith and not by sight”, he is describing a way of seeing and living in the world that is incomprehensible to the culture in which he lived. It still is today. You see, even for most of us believers, there is a temptation to treat God like an app on a phone that I can open and close. I am in church, so I open my God app, I am in the parking lot, I'll close the God app, and open the “I need to be out of the parking lot first app”. I turn on the television, and I can then open my baseball app, or local or world news app, and then there is my politics app. What am I getting at? What I am getting at is this, we like to treat God like an app on the phone to turn on or turn off...when God sincerely doesn't want to be an app on our phone. He wants to be the operating system itself where all other apps rest. That is what St. Paul means by saying “we walk by faith and not by sight”. All our apps, my vocation app, my

family app, my entertainment app, my work app, all of it should be resting on the operating system of faith that God has given to me in baptism, that gives me my sight, my understanding, my vocabulary, my life hermeneutic. If any of my apps that I download and open are not compatible with the operating system God has given me in faith, I should short circuit a little. That is what “walking by faith” looks like and that is what vocation looks like in the life of the Church.

I am so very blessed to have grown up in a family where faith wasn’t an app, it was the operating system. It was the hermeneutic I grew up with. As such, I was blessed to have tilled soil for my vocation to sprout because vocations in the life of the Church are very much like that mustard seed Jesus speaks about in our Gospel reading. It is the smallest of seeds, but if it is placed in the right soil and cared for, one day it grows so large that others in our world can find shade underneath its branches. I love that image. That image is in our first reading as well. Ezekiel speaks about how a cedar shoot will be planted on a hill so to become the largest of trees.

It is important to understand the context behind his message. Ezekiel is writing during the lowest point in the bible for the people of Israel. The country was conquered by the Babylonians which resulted in the destruction of the temple and their subsequent exile which lasted well over a generation. This was a terrible time for the people of faith in Israel because they believed that a descendant of King David would be anointed by God to rule over all the kingdoms of the world. This was their understanding of the term “messiah” anyway, translated into Greek as the Christ. It is from the perspective of being a defeated people in exile that Ezekiel prophesied, “Israel will rise again!” Israel will rise again like a small, cut, defeated twig of cedar that will grow into the largest of trees standing majestic on top of a hill. At the time, there was not a lot of empirical evidence that Ezekiel could point at to demonstrate the veracity of his claim. For a defeated people, having hope in the future not only took faith. It took a lot of it.

In our Gospel reading, we have the arrival of the messiah Ezekiel foretold. And Jesus uses the same analogy as Ezekiel, speaking on how the Kingdom of God is like the smallest of seeds, the mustard seed. Carefully planted and cultivated, this little seed becomes the largest of bushes with branches that attract the birds of the sky. Of course, God’s take on the prophesied messiah was a bit different from what the people of Israel imagined. The messiah wasn’t to be a new King David that would defeat Babylonians or Romans. The Messiah is the Son of God who offers salvation to the human race from the power of sin and death.

The tree on the hill Ezekiel prophesied is to be understood as the Church, you see. When Jesus suffered and died for our sins on the cross, most of the disciples had already abandoned him. I mean, when thinking about the history of the Church, talk about a mustard seed! Then Easter happened, Jesus rose from the dead like he said he would. Then Pentecost happened, the descent of the Holy Spirit was poured out upon us. Then the Church happened, and on the opposite side of the planet, a church was eventually built in Federal Way that is thriving two thousand years later in a world where over a billion people identify themselves as Roman Catholic followers of Jesus. Do you see where I am going with this? My friends, consider what St. Paul is trying to tell us when he invites us to walk by faith and not by sight. What he is saying is become part of the story, or if you feel like you are already in the story, then go deeper!

You and I know there is so much to worry about in our world today. There is so much that happens in our personal lives that can cause us all kinds of anxiety. For some, these worries can be existential as we desperately seek answers to questions like, who am I, why am I here, and where am I going? We are challenged this weekend to consider the areas in our lives that we are called to walk by faith and not by sight. What does that mean as we reflect on our own vocational call? What does that mean with all the anxieties and worries we might have about the future? You see, it is during these times of doubts and fears when Ezekiel shows us a cedar shoot that becomes the largest of trees. It is during these times when Jesus shows us a mustard seed that can give all kinds of birds shelter. It is during times like these that the Church can offer you Jesus Christ in the Holy Eucharist, Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity, the bread of angels and our food for the journey because the big picture is this: the hope Jesus Christ offers us does not disappoint. We know this. We know this. Why? Because no matter what we face in life or what worries befall us, how far more blessed and better off we are when in all things we turn our gaze to Jesus, let him into our hearts, and walk by faith and not by sight! My friends, that faith has carried me for twenty-five years as a priest. Twenty-five years. Please, God, may I have twenty-five more!