

15th Sunday of Ordinary Time “We are called to be Missionary Disciples”

Bishop Frank Schuster

Back in 2017, I accompanied a delegation from the Archdiocese of Seattle to Orlando for the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops’ Convocation on Catholic Leadership. The first question I had when I got off the plane was, “Why Orlando in July?”. You know, I don’t think people can truly appreciate 90-degree weather and what feels like 100% humidity until you have to wear a black suit wherever you go. That part was a real penance, however, the conference itself was wonderful. The purpose of this convocation was to answer Pope Francis’ challenge that he gave the world in his exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, The Joy of the Gospel. Central to Pope Francis’ hope articulated in the exhortation is that all the baptized take on the challenge to become what he calls “missionary disciples”. Missionary disciples are followers of Jesus who marked by the joy of the Gospel seek out those living on the peripheries of society and accompany them, welcoming them into the Body of Christ. Pope Francis feels that as Church we have become too comfortable and we need to get out of our comfort zone, reaching out to those in society who are most in need to receive the joy of the Gospel. I mention this because in our Gospel reading today Jesus sets the example of what missionary discipleship looked like for the early Church. The Gospel says, “Jesus summoned the Twelve and began to send them out two by two and gave them authority over unclean spirits.”

Let’s break this down a bit. First of all, Jesus summoned his disciples and sent them. By our baptism, we have been summoned to be active members of the Body of Christ and to spread the good news of God’s love for the world around us through the example of our lives. Second, the Gospel says Jesus gave these missionaries authority over unclean spirits. There is a recognition here that the world around us has unclean spirits. And with some of the technology we have today and so much that is accessible to us and our children on the internet and social media, I believe we can say the world around us in fact has unclean spirits. We need to recognize that. As Church and as baptized Christians, we are called to exercise authority over the unclean spirits in our world and we need to do so by our witness and example. And so, what would help us be more convincing in our witness to others?

I think we get an answer to this when Jesus says to his missionary disciples, “Wherever you enter a house, stay there until you leave.” I really love that advice because it must be said, when it comes to evangelization, God prefers spiritual fruits not religious nuts. Fruitful spirituality can only come from relationship and trust. It is like the lyric from a Paul Simon song I like a lot, “You want to be a missionary? You got that missionary zeal? Let a stranger change your life? How does that make you feel?” I love that perspective because if we are strangers to those we seek to evangelize, we will not be successful with our witness. We have to be interested in having relationships with others so to earn that trust. This is why, by the way, the first catechists and evangelizers of the Gospel are in fact parents. The most convincing evangelists in my life weren’t popes or prophets. The most convincing evangelists in my life have been family, relatives, close friends, and teachers I respected. The more faithful they were in their lives as Christians, the more I wanted to be like them. The more distant or wishy-washy they were as Christians, the less attractive they were to me as models of faith. I think we probably all have the same experience in this regard, if we were to sit down and think about it, and it drives home the

need for us to invest in our relationships around us and to be good examples of what it means to be a Christian to those we have influence over. Amen?

The call to missionary discipleship is important in this day and age because there are so many in our society on the peripheries that are at risk. We encounter them in our workplace, on our streets at times, here at church and even at our family gatherings. We need to be challenged to move out of our comfort zones to develop a closer relationship to those around us that we find on the periphery and to welcome them into a relationship with Jesus.

How do we begin the process of becoming missionary disciples? Obviously, this process begins by deepening our relationship with Jesus ourselves, through prayer and personal conversion, and steering clear of unclean spirits. This is because missionary discipleship must begin with a close relationship with the Lord. However, a relationship with Jesus cannot stay a “me and Jesus” show. We are called to go out to the peripheries and develop relationships there, like our Gospel reading suggests, becoming more interested in the lives of the people around us who are struggling in our families, in our neighborhoods, the shut ins, the elderly, the hospitalized, the imprisoned, the immigrant, the homeless the list goes on. We can ask ourselves, who are the people in our families, neighborhoods, work or community that we could reach out to more intentionally this week? Who are the people in my family or community I can develop a deeper relationship with so to share the joy of the Gospel? If every Catholic answered this question, we would change the world as missionary disciples. We really would. I believe that if we simply cared enough, we can change the world as ambassadors of God’s grace. How does this happen? One soul at a time!