

ORDINARY TIME TWENTY-SEVENTH SUNDAY CYCLE C 2010 HOMILY

(Habakkuk 1:2-3, 2:2-4; 2 Timothy 1:6-8, 13-14; Luke 17:5-10)

THE POWER OF FAITH

In the classic movie called “The Bells of St. Mary’s,” faith brings about great results. In this schmaltzy film that appeared in 1946, Fr. Chuck O’Malley (played by Bing Crosby) and Sr. Mary Benedict (played by Ingrid Bergman) spar with each other in a way at once both light-hearted and dead serious. They both have one common goal, however, and that is to find a way to get a new building for the parish school of St. Mary’s. It just so happens that a business tycoon named Horace P. Bogardus has a very suitable building just across the street from St. Mary’s School and the assistant pastor, Fr. O’Malley, and the principal, Sr. Benedict, conspire to relieve Mr. Bogardus of this structure. In the midst of a typical tense relationship between rectory and convent that was common at the time, the priest and the nun succeed (of course) and, in the bargain, they make Mr. Bogardus happy to make such an incredible gift. Crosby and Bergman play these roles to the hilt. But the movie also makes a point: genuine faith can bring about quite unexpected things.

This is the theme of today’s Gospel (from St Luke) too. Just a little faith, Jesus says, can have a big impact on our lives and on those of people around us. He uses the image of the mustard seed, which is so small it is more like a speck of dust. But faith so tiny as such a seed can do marvelous things like uproot a mulberry tree and cause it to obey a command to be transplanted to the sea. Now a mulberry tree is a fairly large tree with an extensive root system – and so to uproot it would be an intricate task; and it would be virtually impossible for it to grow in deep water. But with even a smidgen of faith, Jesus says, it could be done.

Jesus here is telling us that faith is one of the greatest forces in the world. Jesus was raised in a Middle Eastern culture that used language in an exaggerated way to make a point. This phenomenon is, of course, known as hyperbole. But the underlying truth here is that what looks completely impossible becomes possible – if it is approached with faith. We basically often have two choices in life: we can say “it can’t be done” or we can have the attitude that, if it is the right thing to do, it can and must be done. This was the approach that Fr. O’Malley and Sister Benedict took in “The Bells of Saint Mary’s.” They needed a new school building – and their strong faith did the rest.

Of course, this film is a fictional story. But we have all experienced real examples of the power of faith. I have an old friend who is also a priest. When I first met him, he was a fallen away Catholic. We were in school together in Minnesota and when I got a job at a college run by the Benedictine monks, I asked the neighboring convent of nuns to pray for my friend. In a few weeks, this guy was back in the church and talking about being a Franciscan! This is the strength of prayerful faith and trust in the Lord. We have also often trusted God when we or a loved one have fallen ill. In such moments, we know deep in our hearts that we are not alone; God is with us with all the power of his grace.

Our parish has experienced the unbelievable results of trusting faith in the building of our new church. Like the prophet, Habakkuk, in today’s first reading, many of us have said: How long, O Lord?” How long

is it going to take to get this church done? But, like Habakkuk, we also had a vision and we patiently waited for the vision to become a reality. As the Lord God said to this prophet: "For the vision still has its time, presses on to fulfillment, and will not disappoint; if [the vision] delays, wait for it, it will surely come." The fruit of our trusting faith has risen massively from the ground out there before our very eyes. And our vision now includes beautiful stained glass and stations and other artifacts because God blessed our patient faith with the coincidence that these gorgeous items are available to us from the churches that are closing in the Cleveland Diocese. Although this is sad for our neighbors to the north, it is a blessing to us and it seems appropriate that all this art be put to good use in our new parish church. We waited for the vision to materialize and, in God's time, it has surely come!

The second part of the Gospel today simply reminds us that we can never put God in our debt or have any claim on him. When we have done our best, we are like the slave who waits on his master; we cannot claim any credit for just doing our duty. We certainly cannot ever manipulate God (our master) into doing what we want. We are called, rather, always to do his will. In saying that we disciples are "unprofitable" (or "worthless" as some translations have), Jesus is not saying here that we are not worth anything in ourselves or in our work for the Lord. He is saying that doing our duty does not empower us to claim we deserve God's graciousness. His blessings to us are always sheer gift. In building our new church, we have faithfully and loyally done our duty. We have been good servants and good stewards and must continue to be so until we have completed our work in generously sacrificing to make this vision a reality.

Ultimately, serving the Lord is a question of love. He has first loved us – and he never stops loving us. Every one who has ever been in love knows that nothing can ever satisfy the claims of love – that is, no one can ever be worthy of love. It is a gift. And we are called to love God in return for his immense love for us – to do the best we can in serving him, especially in our neighbor, because we can never love or serve him enough to repay him. And we also trust this divine Lover. We have faith in his power – as Fr. O'Malley and Sr. Benedict did and as I did when I asked the nuns to pray for my friend and as we all did when we set out six plus years ago to build a new church. This faith in the goodness of the Father and in the power of the Death and Resurrection of his Son can lead us under the guidance of the Spirit to love so much that we astonish even ourselves!