

27<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Ordinary time C Faith and Mulberry Trees

Fr. Frank Schuster

OK, let's start with a super easy one you all know. Her name was Agnes. She was the youngest of her siblings in her family. She enjoyed being part of her parish's youth group and was drawn to Christ at a very young age. She decided that she wanted to follow Christ by becoming a sister. She taught catechism and geography in a Catholic High School for the sisters of Loretto. One day, in 1948, she encountered a woman, dying in the streets. She stayed with her until she died. Filled with compassion for the poor, she received permission to leave her order and start a new order of sisters who would dedicate themselves to the ministry of caring for the poorest of the poor in the most dangerous places of the world. No mystery here. You know whom I am talking about. Her name is Mother Teresa. St. Teresa now...I just love how that sounds.

By the way, you all know that Agnes took the name Teresa after St. Therese of Lisieux whose feast day is actually today, right? Let's talk about her. St. Therese was a young saint who died of Tuberculosis at 24. While lying on her sick bed she prayed about her place in the Body of Christ, being so sick. She couldn't build universities, she couldn't start any convents. It was during that time she was so sick that she discovered that her vocation was to exist in the heart of the body of Christ, to love. She found that the path to sanctity wasn't about doing the great things it was about doing little things with great love. Now you know where Mother Teresa got that quote. In honor of Mother Teresa's namesake we have a statue of St. Therese of Lisieux outside. Perhaps you wish to make a visit today.

Here is another one: There was a child named Raymond. I mention him because my middle name is Raymond. This Raymond was the second son of a poor weaver. It is said that Raymond was particularly mischievous as a youth. He reported later on that the influence of his mother eventually turned his life around. He entered into seminary and became a popular priest. He traveled all over the world, even helped start a seminary in Nagasaki, Japan which I had the privilege of visiting. When he returned to Poland, he set himself to work by writing against the Nazis, who were occupying his country at the time. He was arrested and sent to Auschwitz where he dedicated himself to the work of

ministering to others. One day, after three prisoners successfully escaped, the Nazis responded by randomly selecting ten inmates to die by being placed in an underground bunker to starve to death. When a man near him, who had a wife and kids, was selected for this fate, this priest stepped forward to offer himself in the other man's place. I am sure you have heard of him too. His name was Fr. Maximilian Kolbe.

How does a girl named Agnes go from a Church youth group to becoming Mother Teresa? How does a sickly young woman become St. Therese of Lisieux? How does a young boy named Raymond go from the second son of a poor weaver to becoming Fr. Maximilian Kolbe? Have you ever asked the question: What did these people have in abundance that I don't have?

There was a young man named Francis, born in Glentana, Montana. During the depression, he tried to earn a living by selling magazines across the country for a company that promised a good commission. When the company failed to pay Francis for his work, he almost died of starvation and thirst, thousands of miles away from home. He worked odd jobs, lived hand to mouth, rode the rails from town to town, learning telegraphy during the night. He eventually got a job as a telegrapher for the railroad. He fell in love and got married to the daughter of a conductor, had three children, worked night shift for decades so that he would have enough money to send his children to Catholic School. You probably don't know him as well as I do...He's my Grandpa Frank Schuster, current address the Kingdom of God.

My friends, all of us have amazing people in our lives don't we? We all know people who have an amazing drive and an amazing story. Have you asked the question, what do these people have in abundance that I don't have? Christians, people like Agnes, Therese, Raymond and Francis all have some things in common. To begin with, they have faith. They have awesome faith. They have the faith to move mountains and mulberry trees. Secondly, people like Agnes, Therese, Raymond and Francis put other people's needs before themselves. Indeed, they are people who would lay down their lives for others. Thirdly, all three of them shared a profound respect for human life, from conception to natural death, and every stage in between, something this world could do better at with all the violence we see throughout the world. This is also something to remember on Respect Life Sunday this weekend and call to minds ways we can increase

the sanctity of human life in our areas of influence. You see, Agnes, Therese, Raymond and Francis are people who understood that the Lord and their Catholic faith are first priorities in life. Everything else flows from that faith. Can the same be said of us?

To that point, remember how Habakkuk, in the first reading, talked about what faith looks like? It is the kind of faith that carries people through destruction, violence, strife and clamorous discord. And he should know as he was writing during the chaotic and devastating era of the Babylonian exile. Furthermore, Jesus said two things about faith in the Gospel reading, didn't he? First: A little bit of faith, even the faith the size of a mustard seed, can carry us a long, long way. Secondly: faith is not a birthright, but rather a gift from God. This is why faithful people are also humble people, seeing themselves as servants of God, allow Christ's love to flow through them to others.

My friends, we all have been given this gift of faith. We are given this gift in baptism. For most of us, the gift of faith can be like a dying ember in a corner of our hearts at times. People like Agnes, Therese, Raymond and Francis, put their ember in the center of their hearts, they put fuel on that ember and make it a raging fire to keep them warm on the coldest nights. We want to stay close to saintly people because their fire helps keep us warm. We want that warmth for ourselves and so, again, we stand with the disciples in the Gospel asking Jesus to "Increase our faith". An answer comes to us through St. Paul who tells Timothy in our second reading, "Beloved: I remind you to stir into flame the gift of faith that dwells within you." Stir into flame the gift of faith that dwells within you.

My friends, there is never a day or an hour or a situation that should ever cause us to lose faith. I get that a lot as a priest: "Father, this that or the other thing happened to me, I am losing faith." I am compassionate with them. However, Agnes found faith in the streets of Calcutta. Therese found faith even as she was slowly dying of Tuberculosis. Raymond found faith in the horrors of Auschwitz. Francis found faith during the Great Depression. Habakkuk found faith in the trials and tribulations of the Babylonian Exile. St. Paul, Timothy and the Apostles found their faith in Jesus Christ, despite persecutions that would end up claiming their lives.

Christians, the Gospel today challenges us to reexamine our priorities. What does our faith look like? Do we place God first in our lives? Do we consider others as more important than ourselves? Do we respect the gift of life the way we should? Do we have the faith, courage and conviction to move mountains and mulberry trees? And there are so many obstacles in the spirit life, aren't there? Addiction is like an unwanted tree that that only faith can uproot. Financial security can be like a mountain only faith can move. A hard relationship at home or at work or in public life can be like a challenge only faith can move. As we contemplate the Mount Everest's in our lives, and the sequoia's in our path, we should also remember that not too long ago the idea of founding a parish and building a church felt like a mountain only faith could move. And we went from a barn, neighboring churches, to a cafeteria, and to a warehouse and...here we are! We have been here four and a half years already, and we have discovered that we built too small, that we need more meeting spaces for our ministries. What a great problem to have! How did we get this point? The answer: Faith, the kind of faith that moves mountains and mulberry trees.

My friends, what are the obstacles that you need to move in your life? Name them in the silence of your heart right now, those impossible mulberry trees that need moving in your life. I now invite you to hear St. Paul whisper into your ear again, the beautiful advice he gives us in the second reading, "remember the gift of faith God has given you through Christ our Lord", remember that gift of faith. Now, "stir it into flame!"