

16th Sunday of Ordinary Time “Recreation and Renewal”

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July is a good time to take a few days here and there to get some rest and relaxation. In fact, beginning this Sunday, I'll be off to a conference in New Orleans and then officially on vacation afterwards for a few weeks. Like in our Gospel reading, we all need to find time each year for a little recreation. I think we all know, however, that it can sometimes be difficult to find that place of solitude Jesus is talking about. I remember a trip once to Butchart Gardens near Victoria. I love that place, however, the gardens were really packed that day. Gardens are of course locations where you should find quiet and peace. I found delight contemplating the incongruity of the crowds crammed shoulder to shoulder trying to enjoy tranquility. The best moment was when a disheveled mother was trying to get a photograph of herself together with her kids with the serene flowers in the background. She was fighting two forces of nature: the oblivious people who would walk between the camera and her kids, and the kids who were altogether nonplused by the gardens, “can we go yet mom”, that sort of thing. I finally heard this mother in distress yell out, “Sir, would you please take our picture, wait a second, kids, for Pete’s sake shut up and smile!” (click) As if, “We are having a good time here! I want to take a picture of the good time we are having! Don’t you give me that look!” It was really funny. I thought to myself, “Thank God I am celibate” while taking a moment to say a prayer for parents everywhere. It is hard work to be a parent and so God bless all parents!

It is true that vacations can sometimes be more work than play and so I started reflecting on the word recreation. What I like most about it is that you could decide to pronounce it “re-create”. For us to function as human beings, we need time away to “re-create”. If we don’t, we can find ourselves in burnout mode and start self-medicating ourselves in unhealthy ways. I think this is why after a lot of hard work Jesus tells his disciples in our Gospel reading this weekend that it is time to go off to a deserted place and rest.

Even with the best priests and married couples, good people can be tempted to burn out after a while. We all need opportunities to take a break and recreate. Who is better at re-creating us than our Creator? I love that word recreation because it implies the time we need to allow God to re-create within us enthusiasm, optimism and new life in our vocational journeys. An illustration of this: One of the more blessed honors I sometimes get as a priest is when parishioners come to me asking for advice on how to fix their marriage. It seems to usually follow the pattern: times are tough, communication is breaking down, and the kids are driving us nuts...you get the picture. The first question I usually ask is, “Tell me the last time you and your spouse entrusted your kids to a grandparent or good friend and got away for a couple of nights, just the two of you?” The answer is usually a blank stare, “Wow I can’t remember”. I then usually ask, “When was the last time you got a babysitter and went out for a nice dinner and night on the town, just the two of you?” Again, blank stare.

Setting aside the weirdness of a celibate giving marriage advice, if a married couple doesn’t take the time to continue doing the things that they did when they were falling in love in the first place, after a few years or even decade or two, Houston we have a problem. Every so often, parents need to find a way to get out of Dodge to recreate, to be husband and wife for a weekend rather than mom and dad. Easier said than done...but important.

You see, after a lot of fruitful and tiring ministry, Jesus says in the Gospel reading that it was time to go off to a deserted place to rejuvenate. Jesus is saying: “it is time to renew ourselves in prayer after all the hard work we have been doing”. And we find out that getting away wasn’t that simple for the Lord and his disciples. Life is what happens when you are making plans. I find it inspiring that, when the Lord gets off the boat and discovered that his time off was canceled, he was able to respond with tenderness and compassion to the crowd that followed him rather than burnout. Jesus knew how to take care of himself by taking retreat time regularly so missing this one wasn’t the end of the world. Jesus took time alone every day to re-create in the presence of his heavenly Father. And he is giving us a good example to follow. A prayer life provides great benefits. This is why, when something unexpected happens and plans get changed, Jesus in his humanity doesn’t burn out. How much better would our lives be if we took time each day to re-create in the presence of God in prayer? How much better would our state of mind be? How much better would our relationships be if we took “time outs” to pray?

And so, this Sunday, we can ask ourselves, are we good about scheduling time in our calendars for re-creation. Are we scheduling enough vacation time each year? Are we making sure that we get a little time every day to re-create in the presence of the Lord in prayer? I think this is important for married couples, I think this is important for religious and I think this is important for dedicated single folk, young and old. We need this balance for our vocations, whatever walk of life we find ourselves in.

We are also invited to call to mind the times when our plans for recreation, or life plans in general for that matter, have gotten thwarted for some reason like we see in our Gospel reading this weekend. In those moments, we can find ourselves with the Lord on the beach realizing our plans just got canceled. With Jesus, can we respond to these moments in life with compassion? Even the frustrations in life are an opportunity for prayer and to grow closer to the Lord who understands us better than we think. This is what I believe St. Paul was getting at in our second reading when he tells the Ephesians, “Brothers and sisters: In Christ Jesus you who were far off have become near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace...” He is our peace! My friends, the readings this weekend illustrate the power of re-creation and a recipe for renewal.