

11<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Ordinary Time “Forward in Faith”

Fr. Frank Schuster

June 12<sup>th</sup>–13<sup>th</sup>, 2021

On my last weekend as your pastor at Saint Teresa of Calcutta parish, I cannot think of a more relevant selection of readings than what the Church offers us this Sunday. We have Ezekiel proclaiming how a cedar shoot will be planted on a hill so to become the largest of cedars. We have St. Paul challenging us to walk by faith and not by sight. And we have Jesus talking about a little mustard seed growing into the largest of bushes where birds can find food and shelter.

I am probably just getting too caught up in the moment, but on this last weekend I get to be with you as your pastor, it just feels like the readings this Sunday are talking about us. The parallels are so striking. Our first office and daily mass chapel when I arrived here in 2007 was in a barn. My first Sunday Mass with you was in a middle school cafeteria. Talk about a mustard seed. Within six months together we moved from that barn and cafeteria to Check Ride Driving School which became our first “church” and pastoral center. It is there where we grew and grew until God was ready for us to move here. Today we have over a thousand registered families in our parish and branches strong enough to hold a thousand more.

Back in the day, there were a lot of critics saying this would never happen. No one can really blame them. I mention this because it is simply a part of our parish history and it should be remembered. We had a Conditional Use Permit deadline over our heads and the clock was ticking. If we didn’t make the deadline, we simply would not have been able to build here or just about anywhere around Woodinville because of the new codes. It was also a horrible shock to our community when Fr. Scott, a truly beloved priest, was moved after only three years as your first pastor. For the record, he did a great job in recruiting a core group of parishioners to begin the process of founding a parish. I pray he is always remembered for that. However, the Archdiocese moved him before his term was up and sent me here to continue the mission. Suffice to say, there were a lot of unhappy campers in 2007. Parishioners were upset about the transition, why it happened, and were worried about the viability of the parish. Families left the parish discouraged due to the transition and because there was simply not a lot of evidence at that moment to support the claim that the parish would be successful here. These were rough days. God always wins though. God always wins, most of the time despite ourselves. God always wins if we just walk by faith and not by sight like we eventually did together. We did. It wasn’t easy in those early days but we found a way to work together and we set our sight on Jesus. Once we did that, we grew as a community and were able to move forward in faith, one foot in front of the other. The result? Here we are. Here we are. God always wins. You are proof of that.

Of course, our story isn’t unique. Our story is the story of God’s chosen people. I think it is worthwhile to understand the context behind our first reading from Ezekiel. He 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 faith.

In our Gospel reading, we have the arrival of the messiah Ezekiel foretold. And Jesus used 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 was not going to be a new King David that would defeat Babylonians or Romans. The messiah was the Son of God who offered salvation to the human race from the power of sin and death.

The tree on the hill Ezekiel prophesied can be seen as the Apostolic Church. 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 and the night Jesus was betrayed, talk about a mustard seed! Then Easter happened, Jesus rose from the dead like he said he would. Then Pentecost happened and the Holy Spirit descended from heaven like tongues of fire. Then the Church happened, and a new parish church in Woodinville is built 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. As tempted as I am to reflect on our parish’s history in this regard, it isn’t the past that really matters as much as what it looks like going forward. A theme for our parish since our early days together has been “Forward in Faith”. Although it is good to take a look behind us every so often to see where we have been, it is where we are going that matters. Where are we going? The Kingdom of God! How do we get there? Through Jesus Christ! Who do we go there with? Each other, and whoever we invite along the way. How does God operate? Through you, so go out there and start inviting! There are so many people out there that would be better off if they were inside here with us. That only happens through you. And so, there is no time to stay comfortable, there is no time to rest on our laurels, the mission of the Church continues. If you only remember three words from me, remember the words, “forward in faith” and always reflect on what that means for you personally and for our parish.

I say this because you and I both 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. And so, we are also challenged this weekend to consider the areas in our personal lives that we are simply blind and feel defeated, where we are called to walk by faith and not by sight. Name the anxieties you have about the future right now, for yourself, for your family and for our world. What are your doubts and fears?

My friends, always remember that it was during a time of doubt and fear when Ezekiel showed us a cedar shoot that became the largest of trees. It was during times like that when Jesus showed us a mustard seed that can become a majestic bush. It is during times like these that the Church will show you the cross and an empty tomb that foreshadows our salvation. The big picture is this, the hope Christ offers us for the future will never disappoint. We know this. We know this. Why? Because the history of our parish and history of the Church demonstrates that no matter what challenges we are confronted with in life, how blessed and better off we always are if we just simply trust Jesus, set our sight on him and move forward in faith.