

HOMILY 25 JULY 2010 SUN 17C HT-W/XII-PC

One of the great frustrations of being a pastor is that people leave the parish. It's become a more common phenomenon in recent decades. It's nothing unique to our parishes in Weston and Platte City. But as a pastor I'm become more keenly aware of it than before. One of the reasons people leave is that the pastor isn't doing what they think he should do. And one of the frustrations that pastors have is that, sensitive as we try to be to the various concerns people have, their notions of what should be done are not always right. Occasionally, they aren't even reasonable. In certain cases, different groups in a parish have diametrically opposed notions of what should be done: it is simply impossible to accede to everyone's request. Some group won't get it wants; and some people will be upset.

Now, with all this in mind, we come to appreciate better how difficult God's job must be. God gets prayers from all kinds of people from all over the world who all want different things. And God knows that people aren't always praying for what's best for them. Sometimes, in fact, people are their own worst enemy; if they got what they wanted, it would be a disaster for themselves and everyone around them. Moreover, different groups with contrary agendas pray for the exact opposites. So at the end of the day, some folks just won't get what they're praying for.

When people don't get what they ask for, there's a temptation to give up on God, just as there is a temptation to leave the parish when the pastor refuses their request. It's a painful fact of the spiritual life that the Lord doesn't always give us what we think best, even when we've thought and prayed a lot about the matter. So it's important to consider the Scripture lessons for today, since the story from Genesis is the account of an unanswered prayer. Abraham is praying to the Lord to spare the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. And he bargains and haggles and pleads with the Lord. He succeeds in begging him all the way down to where the Lord agrees to spare the cities if he can find just 10 righteous folks there. But we know the rest of the story. The cities get destroyed . . . apparently there weren't 10 righteous folks; in fact, the residents tried to assault the Lord's messengers upon their arrival. So at the end of the day, Abraham didn't get what he wanted. Granted, his nephew Lot and his daughters are spared, but everything & everyone else goes up in smoke. Nor is Abraham's case an isolated one. Paul prayed for deliverance from a thorn in the flesh, but was denied. Jesus prayed that the cup of his passion might be taken away from him, but ended up having to drink it to the last drop.

One lesson to draw from this is that prayer is not simply a matter of asking for favors. Prayer is about entering into a real, vital, meaningful relationship with God our Father; it's about strengthening and building up our friendship with the Lord. And like any relationship involving fallen, fallible human beings such as ourselves, misunderstanding, disappointment, and frustration can arise. If you think you're the first righteous soul to have his prayers disappointed, just remember Abraham, Paul, and Jesus himself. Jesus teaches us that our Father knows our needs better than we do. He wants to give us the very best, that's precisely what he does in giving us the Holy Spirit. When it comes to the smaller things—health, wealth, etc.—God knows our true needs better than we do, and he invites us to walk by faith, not by sight, trusting in his wisdom and love. May the prayer of this Eucharist increase the Spirit's presence within our hearts and strengthen our faith in God's love.