

Epiphany 5 year B

2 Kings 4:8-37, 1 Cor. 9:16-23, MK 1:29-39

Most of you know that because I began my journey to the priesthood in Alaska I had the option to pursue my theological studies in a non-traditional way. I attended St. Mary-of-the-Woods College in Indiana. It is a Roman Catholic Divinity school. The first time I went there I could not believe the scale and grandeur of the old, early 1900's buildings. The College is set among trees on 1200 acres of land and there is an active convent on the grounds. I was just awestruck by the beautiful architecture. There is a cavernous Basilica there connected to the Sisters of Providence Mother House. It has rose colored marble walls and ornate columns and it also has relics of the woman who founded the order, Mother Theodore Guerin. My first time there, Like a tourist, I was gawking and taking a lot of pictures of all the ornate furnishings I came across,

and As I was strolling along I discovered, connected to the Basilica, The Chapel of the Blessed Sacrament. I had never seen such a place before in my whole life. This is where the consecrated “wafer” is displayed as the Body of Our Lord Jesus Christ. I was not prepared for what I saw when I walked into the chapel, I remember thinking I am so glad I have my camera.

It was like a whole other world inside And it smelled sacred—a bit perfumey but not over powering. It was cavernous, quiet and clean. At the far end of the Chapel was a dome ceiling painted sky blue with clouds and directly underneath was the Monstrance or the vessel that held the Blessed Sacrament. It was pure gold but the most spectacular thing in the whole chapel was the altar that the Monstrance sat on.

I later learned that it is called a baldachin altar and it was cut from a single 8,000 pound block of flawless Carrera marble. The thing was huge!!!

Around the Blessed Sacrament were carved 4 life-sized angels. Each one pointing to or staring eternally at the presence of Jesus, in the wafer. These angels stand on a slab of marble the size of a mini-cooper and the whole thing is surrounded by 4 marble columns and topped with a huge elaborately carved marble canopy.

Needless to say I was awestruck. My first reaction was I just had to capture this exquisite art on film--- but I had a problem. There were four older ladies in the front of the chapel that were in my camera shot. So, I thought, I have a while before my first class starts so I can wait until they leave to get a great picture of that altar and I took a seat in the back pew to wait. I looked around, read some literature and said a few prayers to bide my time while I waited for the ladies to move.

And I began to get a little irritated when more ladies came into the chapel and sat down in the front because my time was running out before I had to get to class and I wanted THAT picture.

So, I waited, what I thought was patiently, for the chapel to empty and as I was thinking about how I could shoot a picture around the ladies I spied an antique clock in the corner to the right of the altar. It was one of those wooden ones , like a mantel clock, with a silver face that's shaped like a bow-- tucked away inconspicuously. I noticed that I had been sitting there for about 30 minutes and the ladies who were there when I first arrived were leaving. Now, I have been accused of being a bit slow on the uptake at times but it began to dawn on me who these ladies were and why they wouldn't leave the chapel .

These ladies who were coming and going were Sisters of Providence who lived in the Mother house and they were keeping vigil, in thirty minute intervals, over the Blessed Sacrament. And like a slap in the face I suddenly realized my ego-centric passion. How could I have been so self-centered especially in a place like this?

These women had submitted their whole lives, they released all thoughts of self to adore and pray to Jesus. And here I was acting just like a tourist whom I used to cuss in Alaska because they were standing in the middle of the road blocking traffic while they snapped a picture, and who were unwilling to accommodate to the locals and their new surroundings.

Paul speaks of this lack of accommodation in his letter to the Corinthians. He reminds the congregation he founded on an earlier trip what he had to do to win converts. Remember Paul started his missionary visits in the local synagogues. He studied under the most revered Rabbi at the time, Gamaliel so he knew how to speak about Jesus to the Jewish citizens of the town.

He must have felt very comfortable in the synagogue but he knew it was his calling to go and preach to the non-Jewish citizens in town.

He explains in one of my very favorite passages that in order to spread the Gospel, the Good News of Jesus, he had to “become all things to all people”. He had to adjust the means by which he spread God’s Word to reach more people while never changing the message.

I wonder why Paul was so willing to forget his personal style of preaching to oblige whatever audience he was in front of. I would think that after all he had to endure, the beatings and the riots and all the time he spent in jail he would be tired of conforming to the ways of the same people who were persecuting him. I mean I think if I were him there would come a point where I would have to say “O.K. I’m not accommodating anyone anymore”!

“Submit, yield, modify and defer”. These words are not easily spoken by the average American person today. I know for myself that I usually do not use my name and any of these words together in a sentence! ... put your name at the beginning of each of these

words and you will see what I meanDenise yield, Denise defer, Denise submit the sound of these words being used with my name attached is like listening to fingernails scratching slowly down a chalkboard. It isn't the American way! We believe that to accommodate, yield or defer requires us to forfeit all sense of self and that leads to us thinking: I can't submit, or change. If I do that I will lose my identity completely. But that is not the message we are getting today. Paul shows us there is a way that we can be accommodating and still maintain our authenticity and effectiveness in ministry.

And the wonderful thing is we are blessed with this power also. If we look back on what Paul did and how he became all things to all people, to win hearts by any means, we see that Paul never pointed to himself as a source of strength.

He never said it was by his own power that he could submit to the ways of various people and convert souls, he was always pointing away from himself. He always testified that Jesus was the reason for his success. And Jesus never said it was by his own authority that he could heal physically or spiritually. He was able to submit to the demands on him because he pointed not to himself but to his Father in Heaven as the source of his power.

Remember that, by God's love, we all possess that gift. And it truly is a gift, a blessing, to be able to accommodate, to modify, to change ourselves and become all things to all people in order to spread the Gospel. And I don't mean we need to submit on par with the Nuns I saw in the Chapel that day.

That type of submission is definitely not for all of us but I do mean that we need to start looking beyond ourselves for our source of strength. The scripture passages today invite us to take a hard look at our individual ministry.

We need to start asking ourselves how can I relate what Jesus is to me the best way I can?

Well, I believe We can point people to God by yielding our need to be heard and just listen to someone who needs a friend. We can try to modify our speech and not be so quick to condemn or judge others . We must be willing to submit ourselves to the will of God and not just to the will of our self-centered thoughts. Because God gives us the ability to do all this yielding, modifying, and submitting by telling and showing each one of us that spreading the Good News isn't about our own needs or our own power.

So, that is what I learned in the Chapel that day after I had come to my senses. In my obsession for the best picture I had forgotten the purpose for the Chapel, I had forgotten the reason for the awesome architecture. I was so self-absorbed that I forgot those ladies were Sisters of Providence and that everything they did pointed toward God.

And sitting there impatiently waiting for them to leave I had even forgotten that their inspiring, perpetual devotion to Our Lord Jesus Christ would mean that the Chapel would never be empty.

God alone gives us the power to submit our self-centered will for the sake of Jesus and his Good News, go out, reach out and try to be all things to all people so all your actions point only to him.

Amen.