

May 24 and 25, 2014

Sixth Sunday of Easter, Lectionary: 55

William C. Graham; St. Michael's in Duluth

A Tag Team for Holiness

Just before Christmas, I got a card and note from a dad whose son was one of the 84 young men with whom I lived as a faculty resident at Saint John's University in Collegeville. The dad wrote that while at home, the son attended Mass regularly with his family, but, dad added, the kid could do better while away at college.

So, I immediately called the young man, a very fine fellow, and said simply, "Meet me in the Abbey Church at 5 pm." "Why?" he asked. "We're going to Mass," I said. "Ummm, I'm going to the gym at 5," he said brightly. "No," I countered, "you're going to the gym at 5:30. At 5, you're going to Mass. With me." "Why?" he asked again. "Because it would please your father," I reported. "I am so there!" the kid said. And he was. And afterwards, I used my phone to take a picture of him with his bright smile illuminating the big church, and had him send it to the dad with the caption, "Ask and you shall receive."

That good dad and I were a very good tag team that day. We both communicated to his young son that we care about him, about the

salvation of his soul, about his continuing to grow straight and strong: in age and in wisdom and in holiness. We value his participation in the work and the prayer of the church, and we want him to deepen his own awareness of the absolute necessity of ongoing participation in the mystery, at book and at table, as he seeks to make his heart in the image of the heart of Jesus. That call is not just for college guys; it is a task that belongs to all of us.

Sadly, lots of us falter on that journey. To falter is, of course, part of the human condition. But some folks never recover from their stumble, and stay alienated from the church, and no longer worship with us. There are lots of reasons that people stumble. There is much in our life as a church that has caused many people great heartache, and I hope we can talk about all those issues as a parish in the Sundays and months and years ahead.

We have suffered terribly because of the sex abuse crisis and, with all the rest of society, must learn better how to address and prevent behavior that wounds us all and leaves victims that suffer terribly.

And as a church, we are still not sure about the role and the place of women; the church has always baptized women, which is to say that the church has always recognized the full humanity of women, but how

we should live together in justice and in charity and in church occasions many opinions and judgments and, in truth, we still no do know exactly what justice looks like. A simple decree from the Pope will not solve the issue, so do not look for such a decree soon; the issue is far too complex and deeply rooted for any quick fix by anyone.

So also with regard to issues of human sexuality. The church clearly teaches that married love is a sacrament of Christ's transforming presence. Marriage is undeniably unique among human relationships, and married people have a very special place among the people of God. But let us be clear that marriage is not the only relationship or partnership among the people of God. In our increasingly diverse world and Church, there are other friendships and partnerships and family structures in which we see the witness of holy lives, transforming love at work, God's grace at play. In our diversity, we see that all people are called to love and serve God by loving and serving one another. Diversity is clearly both a gift and a challenge; we are called to see God at work as we seek to build up the world in love. We believers must seek to grow in the conviction that our call to holiness involves our personal transformation and the transformation of the world as prophets of a new adventure of the spirit. Meanwhile, all of us are called

to give the witness of holy lives.

Some people think they have these problems all figured out, and the church should change to teach what they think because they are infallible in their new opinions. Folks, it doesn't work like that. The mysteries of human sexuality have not been solved; there is much we do not yet understand. Lots of us want the church to be a microwave and get everything worked out in 90 seconds or 90 days. The church, however, is not a microwave; it is instead a crock pot, and we are years away from solving these issues in our society and in our church.

In the meantime, we are called to be faithful to book and to table, to our common life, seeking to save our souls and to build up our city and the world in the image of Jesus. We want to be like those earliest Christians of whom we have heard from the Acts of the Apostles; after hearing Philip preach, "There was great joy in that city."

We are called to do what we have heard today from the First Letter of Peter: "Beloved: / Sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts. / Always be ready to give an explanation / to anyone who asks you for a reason for your hope, / but do it with gentleness and reverence." I think that is what the young student's dad and I set out to do: to invite the young man to ongoing faithfulness, to remind him of the promised Spirit

of God who moves among us to quicken us in holiness, reminding us of the man and the mission of Jesus who assures us, “whoever loves me will be loved by my Father, / and I will love him and reveal myself to him.”

Here at St. Michael’s, we are missing many members for many reasons; there are at least 300 households fewer in this parish today than there were when I left here in 1990. Let’s work together to call them home. Really, those who are away, I am very sure, are not doing something more important today than we do here. We are the people of God, the beloved sons and daughters of the Most High. Let’s work together to reassemble here with those who have gone missing; together, let us keep our eyes on the goal, the goal of the kingdom of our Risen Lord, the work of His church in His world, the work of our church in Duluth, Minnesota.

May the Spirit of the Living God breathe on us, protect us from all harm and chaos, lead us kindly on, and bring us to everlasting life.

And let the church say: Amen!