

October 9, 2021

8:45 a.m.

St. Augustine Cathedral

Stewardship Retreat: “Encountering Christ, Joyfully Unleashing your Gifts”*Votive Mass of the Holy Spirit (Is.61:1-3,6,8-9; Mt.5:1-12)*

These Scripture Readings we have just heard proclaimed are well known to us; we’ve heard them dozens of times over the years, throughout our lives. Perhaps even to the point of knowing parts of these powerful passages off by heart! *“The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me---He has sent me....”* Also the beautiful Prayer that flows from Ps. 104: *“Lord, send out Your Spirit, and renew the face of the earth.”* And of course who of us isn’t familiar with what we have come to know as “The Beatitudes”---how Jesus articulates 9 very specific ways of living a “blessed” life----a “joy-filled” and “happy” life in keeping with God’s ways---so that, when we do so in this life, what Jesus said at the end of this passage can also be true: *We will rejoice and be glad, for your reward will be great in Heaven.”*

But what do these Readings have to do with our daily lives?; how do they make a difference in our lives?; what do these Readings ask us to do differently than what we’re already doing with our lives? The answer is: absolutely NOTHING--- unless and until we come to know Jesus as our Lord, our Savior, the One whom we choose to follow as a Disciple follows a Teacher.

When we hear Isaiah’s prophecy, even though he spoke that prophecy around 700 years before Christ, we know that He was speaking of Jesus. In fact in the Gospel of St. Luke, at the very beginning of Jesus’ public ministry, when He went to His hometown synagogue in Nazareth, and He was asked to read and offer a teaching from the Scripture, THIS was the very passage that Jesus purposely chose: *“The Spirit of the Lord God is upon Me because the Lord has anointed Me; He has sent me to bring glad tidings to the lowly, to heal the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, to announce a year of favor from the Lord....to comfort all who mourn....to give them oil of gladness in place of mourning, a glorious mantle instead of a listless spirit....”* And at the end of that Reading, Jesus’ “Homily” consisted of only 9 words: *“This day, this prophecy is fulfilled in your hearing.”* As our Faith matures, we come to realize that the Spirit is not only upon Jesus, but is One with Jesus and the Father, as a Trinitarian God, Whose Love overflows into all Creation, including all Humanity, made in the image and likeness of God.

It is this same Jesus we see in today's Gospel according to St. Matthew Who, again at the very beginning of His public ministry, with only four Disciples---Peter and Andrew, James and John, two sets of brothers whom He has called from their lives as Fishermen---began fulfilling that prophecy of Isaiah: healing, teaching the good news, and proclaiming "a day of vindication by our God", so much so that great crowds began following Him immediately. There was power coming from Him---He taught with authority, conviction---He gave people Hope----He challenged them to make their Faith in God be more vibrant. St. Matthew tells us just before this that *"His fame spread throughout Syria.....and Large crowds followed Him, coming from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judaea, and Transjordan."* That's why Jesus had to find an elevated place---and so He went up the mountain to deliver His inaugural Sermon, that we know as "the Beatitudes".

What were those people looking for? Why were they willing to follow Jesus? They were looking for Hope; Jesus inspired them to change---to grow---to take their Faith more seriously.

Why are you here? What are you looking for? Why are you following Jesus?

We've all come together here on this early Saturday morning for this Retreat under the title: "Encountering Christ". There's no one here, including me, that thinks that you've never done that before; but on the other hand, all of us here may have come here hoping to "encounter Christ" more deeply; to find a greater reason for Hope; to look for the grace of conversion; and to move more deeply into our Love for God and for Neighbor as we move forward on our Journey of Faith. We're here to reflect on Stewardship, which is rooted in what it means to be at more than the surface level of being a Disciple of Jesus. Our Journey of Faith is about so much more than getting Baptized and Confirmed at the beginning of our lives, practicing our Faith and living a relatively faith-filled life, with the hope that we can at last "squeeze" into Heaven at the end of our lives in this world on what we might literally call "a wing and a prayer". No, our Journey of Faith does have Heaven as our ultimate Goal, but it also means making a commitment to work to join with Jesus in building up the Kingdom of Heaven all along the journey of our lives; it means encountering Jesus, knowing and loving Him on a personal level, and then, with the Love of Jesus in our hearts, seeing Jesus in others, and treating others whom we encounter as Jesus would treat them. Stewardship is a more mature level of "Discipleship".

Stewardship can mean a lot of different things. We're in this month of October which is traditionally designated as Respect Life Month. God our Father/Creator has made this beautiful, amazing, world, and entrusted it into our care---we are the Stewards of this world, and we are responsible for caring for all its resources, for the good of ALL, and to make sure that the world endures for generations to come. And God has made every human being in His own image and likeness, which means that, as one of those creatures, we must be good Stewards of the precious gift of human life; we need to realize we are not the masters of anyone's life, but the protectors, defenders, and respecters of all human life.

This month of October is also the month of special devotion to our Blessed Mother and the Holy Rosary. Mary is held in the highest regard among all human beings, not only because she is the Mother of God, but also because she is the ultimate Disciple, and the most faithful **Steward** of all God's gifts. She always said "Yes"/ "Let it be according to Your Word" no matter what was asked of her--- giving generously of her time, her talent, and her treasure.

But *Stewardship* means so much more. As the U.S. Bishops point out in their 1993 Pastoral Letter on Stewardship: "As Christian stewards, we 1) receive God's gifts gratefully, 2) cultivate them responsibly, 3) share them lovingly in justice with others, and 4) return them with increase to the Lord." Stewardship moves our formal "relationship" with Christ thru the Sacraments, or listening to God's Word, to a personal and ongoing encounter; it calls us to be a Disciple sitting on the hillside and listening to the Master teach what it is to live a truly Blessed and Happy life. To strive to be "poor in spirit"; "mourning" with those who are suffering; choosing to be "meek" rather than aggressive and overbearing, disregarding other's rights and dignity; "hungering and thirsting for what is right; showing "mercy" to those who have offended others including ourselves; consciously choosing to have a "clean heart" rather than allowing ourselves to be polluted by the immorality of our day; taking the risk of being "peacemakers" when others want to disrupt, divide, destroy, or diminish others; being willing to be "persecuted" and even made fun of by standing up for what is right; and being ready to be "insulted" or defamed for the sake of the Name of Jesus.

When we encounter Jesus in that way, we will find the key to a blessed/happy life; we will be ready to "Joyfully Unleash our Gifts", whatever those Gifts are, for the sake of building up the Kingdom of Heaven here in the Diocese of Kalamazoo. And this "Encounter" is not a generic "calling". No, Jesus calls each of us by

Name, to come to know and love Him, and in turn to “be known and loved” as precious, unconditionally loved, and eternally valued in the Eyes of Jesus. And when we have that deeper “encounter” with the Lord, and allow the Spirit of the Lord to come upon us, and anoint us, and send us to teach, to heal, and to proclaim the Good News of Jesus, we are truly continuing the redemptive work of Jesus Christ, which is the Church’s mission of teaching, serving and sanctifying.

That is how, in allowing the Holy Spirit to work within us, we become cooperators with the Spirit, which answers the plea of that beautiful Psalm Prayer: *“Lord, send out Your Spirit, and renew the Face of the Earth.”*

God bless you.