

Homily for 3rd Sunday of Lent
March 15, 2009

Introduction

It strikes me as a happy coincidence, serendipitous, Divine Providence that our parish retreat/mission begins on the weekend when twenty-seven candidates for full communion in the Catholic tradition make their intentions public in what are called the "Scrutinies" - a series of questions and answers for the candidates with regard to their joining the Catholic Church at the forthcoming Easter Vigil.

It is also providential that our mission takes place this year as St. Francis of Assisi Parish celebrates the centennial of its lovely church building.

I

Both of these circumstances - the scrutinies and the centennial invite all of us to a reflection on our own lives as Christian-Catholics and our membership in St. Francis Parish.

II

And of course that is precisely what a parish mission is designed to facilitate - a serious reflection on our personal and communal lives as followers of Jesus, at this time and this place in human history.

It is a time of grace, really a gift of the Holy Spirit, an opportunity not unlike that which our candidates for full communion in this religious tradition are experiencing.

III

We get a big boost from today's Gospel as we reflect on the opportunity which the parish mission provides us this week.

Perhaps, like me, you identify somewhat with the Samaritan woman whom Jesus gifts in such a spectacular way:

-she wasn't a particularly outstanding candidate for discipleship, was she? A non-Jew and therefore considered outside the pale for practicing Jews of that time

-she had a pretty checkered past: five husbands, and, as Jesus gently pointed out the current man was not her husband

-she seemed quite absorbed in the ordinary business of fetching water and at least initially not attuned to anything further than that task.

Yet Jesus invited her into his world, as his ambassador, as a herald of His messiahship.

Perhaps we can identify with such scenarios in our own lives.

IV

Let me say a short word about how I plan to proceed in this time of grace here at St. Francis. The text we shall use during our evening reflections will come from the Prophet Micah who laid down the following challenge for people of faith:

"This is what God asks of you, only this: to act justly, to love tenderly and to walk humbly with your God."

We'll consider each of these phrases/challenges, but in reverse order. So on Monday evening we shall reflect on who exactly is this God with whom we are to walk humbly; on Tuesday a consideration of those whom we are called to love tenderly; and on Wednesday we shall take up the very demanding task of acting justly in our modern world. Thursday evening we have scheduled a parish service of Reconciliation, to bring to a close this week of grace.

Conclusion

By way of conclusion, let me tell you a story which I believe has a direct bearing on this week of mission here at St. Francis Parish.

Some years ago a great American missionary returned after many years in Africa and received an assignment as campus minister at a large Catholic university in the eastern part of our country. Shortly after taking up his duties there a young graduate student approached him and asked if he would be willing to serve as her spiritual companion, a kind of spiritual director as she made some significant decisions in her young life. The priest readily agreed, and then told me that the young woman proceeded to ask him a penetrating question: would he be willing to walk with her under the guidance of the Holy Spirit to a place where neither he nor she had ever been.

That question and the possibility which lies behind it strike me as real possibilities for an event such as that which we begin this weekend. If we take these days seriously, it is entirely possible that the Holy Spirit will bring us to a depth and breadth of understanding which none of us has ever before experienced.

That at least is my prayer as we launch into this centennial parish mission here at St. Francis of Assisi Parish.