

Homily.5EasterC.5.15.22
St. Bernard Church
Deacon Tim Sullivan

FINDING LOVE IN THE PARISH

Today's Gospel raises the issue of what is fundamental to the work of the Church.

The issue can be presented by a couple of questions.

What is the mission of the Catholic Church? Related to that question, what is the mission of the Catholic parish?

I think that to a great degree all of us suffer from what we might call a consumer mentality. This mentality is at work when we wonder if we're getting what we pay for when we buy something or hire someone to provide a service for us.

So there's this temptation to think of the Church and especially the parish as a service provider. Does the parish satisfy our needs? Does it meet our expectations?

Many Catholics don't necessarily attend the parish that is closest to them. We shop around. And what is it we're looking for in a parish?

Typically, it's the pastor, the quality of the preaching, whether we like the music, the attractiveness of the church building, things like that.

What should we be looking for in a parish?

Well, that question takes us back to the issue of the mission of the Church and the mission of the parish.

The mission of the Church is to bring Jesus to the whole world. As Jesus commanded in Matthew 28, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations...teaching them to observe all I have commanded you."

Jesus says in John 15:8: "By this is my father glorified, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples."

The primary objective of the Church is to make disciples, and so that is also the primary objective of the parish.

What is a disciple?

A disciple knows Jesus, loves Him, follows Him in every aspect of life and shares their faith in Jesus and His Church with others.

Writing on the mission of the Church in 1975, Pope Saint Paul VI said: “We wish to confirm once more that the task of evangelizing all people constitutes the essential mission of the Church...She exists in order to evangelize.”

So the parish is not a service provider in the way we normally use that expression. The purpose of the parish is to help each of us know and follow Jesus and to equip us to evangelize others who don't know Jesus in His fullness as experienced in the Catholic Church.

In today's Gospel, Jesus focuses on one of the most important aspects of discipleship, one that again has important implications for parish life.

He says “This is how all will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

This means that the very center of life in the parish, the foundation for evangelizing others, is love for our fellow parishioners.

You might be thinking “Well, I like coming here, and I like some of the people here, but I don't know if I really love other people in the parish.” So how does this work?

I want to focus this morning on one practical aspect of forming loving relationships in the parish.

The path to forming disciples who love one another primarily involves participation in groups. When a parish has groups that build friendships which have faith in Jesus as their bond, as the glue that holds them together, caring friendships are formed that lead to active discipleship. One of the big issues which the group must always focus on is this one: “What does the Holy Spirit want us to do?”

Here are just a few examples from life here at St. Bernard's.

Men and women who participate in ACTS are encouraged to meet weekly in small groups. I know of one group of about 15 guys from ACTS who meet here every Friday at 6:30 a.m. They are forming deep friendships and finding ways to serve the Church and evangelize other men and women.

In 2018, a group of 11 of us in the parish met for 32 weeks to study discipleship. We formed close bonds during that time. The Holy Spirit prompted one of the women in the group to raise the issue of how our diocese might respond to victims of sexual abuse. I mentioned to this woman a program I knew of called “Grief to Grace,” which had been developed by a Catholic psychologist just for victims of abuse.

This woman, 4 years later, has been the catalyst for getting other organizations and professional therapists involved, to the point that Grief to Grace will soon be available to people in eastern Oklahoma.

This is how the Holy Spirit calls people. She listened to the prompting of the Holy Spirit and responded.

In another group that meets monthly in the parish, a conversation about newcomers in the parish led several members of the group to organize an effort to welcome and support our new parishioners.

The key is for the parish to have a network of relationships in which the essential elements are growth in holiness, prayer, study, accountability and discernment of where the Holy Spirit is leading.

You might remember that two years ago, the parish participated in what was called a Disciple Makers Survey. About 400 parishioners responded to the survey. Msgr. Gaalaas formed a committee to evaluate the responses and develop a strategy for promoting discipleship in the parish. The report of the committee will be coming out in July. The report will list numerous options for people of the parish to engage in some form of discipleship.

I fully expect that our new pastor, Fr. Gleason, will follow Msgr. Gaalaas's lead in putting a high priority on discipleship and evangelization.

The ground for the growth of discipleship at St. Bernard's is very fertile. It's exciting to think of what can happen here as more and more parishioners enter into fruitful relationships and do what the Holy Spirit leads them to do to build up the Body of Christ.

I will close with just this one sentence from Jesus from Chapter 8 of John's Gospel: *“If you remain in my word, you will truly be my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”*