

HOMILY 25TH SUN OT YRB 2018

I want to start today by sharing with you a quote from Thomas Merton: “People may spend their whole lives climbing the ladder of success only to find, once they reach the top, that the ladder was leaning against the wrong wall.” Very true. I have come to realize that what we need to do in this life is to use what we are really good at to help other people. Sounds very simple, but I think it is something we spend our entire lives figuring out. To say it in churchy terms it would be discerning God’s will to discover how God is calling you to use your gifts and charisms, the gifts of the Holy Spirit to love and serve others. Let me give you a couple of examples from my own life. When I got my first professional job out of college working at a State agency, at the job interview they asked me what my long term career goals were and I said: “Someday I want to run this agency.” I thought this was a good answer at the time, but I was 22 years old. I worked really hard and they gave me the opportunity to try many things. Some of the things I was really good at, some of the things not so much. I received several quick promotions and ended up in a job where I could use what I was good at to help others. But after a while I realized that I did not want to stay in that job for the rest of my life and I realized that I did not want to be promoted any higher in the agency. If I got promoted I would no longer be using what I am good at to help other people. You see, my ladder was leaning against the wrong wall. I probably could have gotten to the top of the ladder, I would have made the short list of those who would be considered, but it would have been wrong for me. So I decided I needed to try some new things. Fast forward to today. Every once in a while someone will say to me: “Fr. Jim, I am afraid that they will make you a bishop and you will leave St. Edith.” They assume that is what I want, to climb the ladder. That is probably the worst ministry that I could be assigned in the Church, not because it is a bad ministry, it is just not right for me. I hope those who make those decisions would know that about me and if they did not would tell them.

In the Gospel reading the disciples are arguing among themselves about who is the greatest. Jesus knew that the way they were defining the greatest was not the way Jesus defines greatness. Jesus

told them that if you want to be the great you must be a servant to this little child. Children were not held in high esteem the way they are in our culture today. They were at the lowest rung of the social ladder. Jesus told them that is what I am going to spend my life on this earth doing and because of that, I am going to suffer greatly and be killed, but I will be resurrected after three days. This was counter cultural then and it still is today. Jesus was different, which is what made him so incredibly attractive and difficult to understand. Christians achieve greatness by being a servant to others, which is a reversal of our cultures values. I have come to realize that the Christian way of life is the most fulfilling and joyful way to live, but it is not always easy and you may not be recognized as great in this life, but you will in the next. You will be resurrected just like Jesus.

If we are striving to be the greatest the way our culture describes greatness, we are comparing ourselves to each other rather than comparing ourselves to Jesus. This leads to jealousy. St. Paul talks about jealousy in the second reading. We want what someone else has and they need to lose it so that we can get it. Jealousy sees another's success and threatening our own. If we are jealous we spend too much time counting other people's blessings rather than being thankful for our own.

Using what we are good at to help other people is a life long journey. Some people have their ladder leaning against the right wall very early in their lives, but I do not think most of us do. And sometimes the right wall at one point in our lives eventually becomes the wrong wall. The great thing about this is that you can always move the ladder, and God will help you if you do. I have heard people say: "I have spent my whole life working at a job that I hate and I don't even need to money anymore." It may be time to move the ladder. I have also heard people say: "I have been really successful at work but I think I need to be a better spouse or parent." Maybe it is time to move the ladder. Some people do not find the right wall until they retire. You can always move the ladder. It is never too late.