

HOMILY
Baptism of the Lord
January 8-9, 2022

A student work director at a large university was giving a guest speaker a tour of the campus ministry building. As they walked down the hallway, they were passing a room labeled “prayer room;” and it became obvious that the director was not going to stop in the room. The guest speaker was curious, so he opened the door and stepped in. There was a musty smell in the room. It was stuffed with boxes, boots, clothes hangers and junk. On the altar stood a pair of cowboy boots, an old Gilby’s gin bottle and a roll of toilet paper. Remember this was the campus ministry building. The director was embarrassed and quickly said: “We used this for a storage room during the summer and just haven’t cleaned it out yet.” I am not sure, but I think he just lied. At first the visitor thought this was sacrilegious, stacking a prayer room full of junk; but then he thought it was rather symbolic of his own life. He was so busy traveling around the country, speaking and doing good things that he stopped praying.

In the Gospel reading, we hear an account of the Baptism of the Lord. We hear that after he was baptized, Jesus was praying. This is one of many times that we find Jesus praying. In fact, just about any time he does something important, Jesus prays. Jesus is God, and he finds it important to pray. We need to assess the importance we place on personal prayer in our lives. Now I am sure there were many good things going on in that campus ministry building at that large university, but it is likely that prayer was not one of them. They had forgotten how important prayer is. My guess is that they didn’t just decide one day to use the prayer room for storage. Probably a few boxes found their way in there when they had no place else to put them, and it kind of developed into a storage room. If there was no prayer room, my guess is that their campus ministry had gotten off track.

That happens with us as well at times. We slowly stop praying as much, and then maybe we stop all together. We think accomplishing the many tasks we have every day is more important than prayer, and that is when we get off track. Things that were maybe very good at one time are no longer so good. Maybe we start going through the motions doing something because we forget why we are doing it. Maybe we are doing activities that we think are good, but treating everyone around us badly in the process.

I know I have to be careful of that. I am not an anxious person, but I have had a low level of anxiety due to COVID and all of the decisions I have to make surrounding it. Sometimes I am short with people because I have so much on my mind; but if I bring Jesus with me during the day, I make some better judgments. What good is my ministry if I am irritating people in the process? Personal prayer keeps us on track. Jesus wants to walk this journey with us; he wants to help us. Let's take him with us on our spiritual journey.

In the Gospel reading, Jesus was baptized by John the Baptist. Remember this was a baptism of repentance. Jesus had nothing to repent for. He did not need a baptism of repentance. Jesus submitted to the baptism of repentance because he wants to be right here with us, he wants to be one of us. Jesus became like us so that we can become like him. The community and religious leaders at the time would not submit to the baptism. They did not want to admit that they had things to repent for. If Jesus had just been present during the baptisms, he would have just been an observer. He established a bond with the other people who were baptized by John that day.

We all have a common bond when we come to Mass on the weekend. You may have gotten out of the habit of coming to Mass on the weekend during COVID; and watching the streaming is just not the same, so you may have stopped watching that, too. During the past two years, have you filled your prayer room with lots of stuff that does not belong there? Have you started doing things other than coming to church on Sunday morning? Do other things seem more important? They are not. Maybe it is time to clean out your prayer room. One of the really positive things about organized religion is being part of a faith community and really belonging here. We all need a place where we belong; and with all of the isolation over the past two years, most of those places have gone away. We are still here ready to welcome you. I know there are still people that do not feel comfortable coming to Mass at this time. I understand. No judgment. We will continue to do the streaming for now, but it is not the same as coming to Mass. We are physical and spiritual beings. We need to be together physically and spiritually.

Love & Peace,
Fr. Jim