

Homily.3LentA.3.12.23
Saint Bernard Church
Deacon Tim Sullivan

PICK UP YOUR STAFF

I want to focus our attention this evening on just one sentence from Saint John's long description of the encounter Jesus has with the Samaritan woman.

At the beginning of the conversation, Jesus simply asks the woman for a drink. The woman, understandably, asks Jesus how He can ask her, a Samaritan, for a drink.

In responding, Jesus says, and this is the sentence I want to especially draw your attention to: "If you knew the gift of God and who is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him and he would have given you living water."

So I want to ask all of you, this evening, "What is the gift of God?" If Jesus asked you, "What is the gift of God?" how would you answer? What would you say?

Well, here are some pretty strong clues from other parts of the Bible.

In Acts of the Apostles, Chapter 2, Verse 38, Peter says to a large crowd, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit."

In Acts of the Apostles, Chapter 10, Peter tells Cornelius, a centurion, about Jesus. As Peter is speaking, the Bible says that "The Holy Spirit fell upon all who were listening to the word," and that those who had accompanied Peter "were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit should have been poured out upon the Gentiles also."

In 1st Timothy, Chapter 1, Saint Paul says to Timothy: "I remind you to stir into flame the gift of God that you have through the imposition of my hands."

Finally, in the Letter to the Hebrews, Chapter 6, the author refers to "those who have once been enlightened and tasted the heavenly gift and shared in the holy Spirit."

So, yes, the gift of God is the Holy Spirit. Fr. Andrew Apostoli, a popular author and speaker, has written a book entitled "The Gift of God; The Holy Spirit."

Back to the questions I asked earlier, "Do we know the gift of God?" That means, "Do we know the Holy Spirit?"

I don't know about you, but I went to Catholic schools from kindergarten through law school, and I knew virtually nothing about the Holy Spirit, who He was, what His mission was, what He could do for me, for all of us.

In July of 1988, I had an experience at a Catholic marriage conference of God the Father revealing His personal love for me. The next day, I realized that I had also received the gift of the Holy Spirit. As the days, the months, and the years went by, the Holy Spirit guided me, prompted me and gave me the strength, the power, to do what He wanted me to do.

One of the reasons that I almost always get emotional when I preach is that the Holy Spirit has led me to lead a life and experience a power I never knew was available. It has been overwhelming.

The Holy Spirit is like the conductor of an orchestra, in the sense that He directs the actions of all the followers of Jesus. He links them together, to make the most beautiful music. So nothing happens by accident.

It's not an accident that all of you are here tonight, that we all belong to the same church family, here at St. Bernard's. We're each part of the orchestra here.

It's not an accident that you encounter specific human beings in your home, at work, at school, wherever you are.

And in addition to linking human beings together in an intentional way, the Holy Spirit gives each of us, when we are doing God's will, a special grace and power. As Saint Paul tells Timothy in his 2nd Letter: "For God did not give us a spirit of cowardice but rather of power and love and self-control."

The leading, the guiding, of the Holy Spirit comes to us in the Bible, preaching, the teachings of the Church, the circumstances of our lives, and His various promptings, He is constantly inviting, directing, guiding, proposing, and suggesting. He is a micro-manager.

The power of the Holy Spirit is communicated to each of us through His gifts. There is a remarkable statement in 1st Corinthians 12:7: "To each individual the manifestation of the Spirit is given for some benefit." Saint Paul adds to this that the Holy Spirit produces sacred powers and "distributes them individually to each person as he wishes."

Let me give one example of how this works.

After my conversion, the Holy Spirit prompted me to start a ministry for Christian men. So I did that. For several years I had different groups of men meeting weekly in my office. My work with men led me to meet some men at a Catholic Church in Edmond, Oklahoma, who had built a large men's ministry at their parish.

One day I was reading a list of retreats and conferences listed in the National Catholic Register. One of the events was a Catholic men's retreat in Springfield, Missouri. There was a phone number for people to call for more information.

So I called. It was a doctor's office. They put me through to the doctor. When I told him why I was calling, he was upset. He said the notice should not have been published, that he had

arranged for a date, a venue and for all the guest speakers for the men's conference, but his bishop had denied permission for the conference because he didn't want an event that was just for men. The doctor added, "This just happened. I haven't had a chance to call the speakers and tell them the conference was cancelled."

I told the doctor, "Don't call them. Let me call some guys I know in Oklahoma and maybe we can just move your conference exactly as you have planned it to Oklahoma City."

And that's what happened. That's how the first statewide Catholic men's conference took place. That was over 27 years ago. Almost every conference since then has hosted at least 900 men and now has led to a statewide Catholic women's conference. And the Holy Spirit planned and executed the whole thing. That's how He works. I was privileged to be just one piece of the puzzle.

In this evening's First Reading, God tells Moses to take his staff and strike the rock, so that the people will have their thirst satisfied. God could have sent water to the Israelites without using Moses and his staff. But He didn't.

In a similar way, God could do today, without us, what Jesus did 2,000 years ago. But he doesn't. He has equipped everyone here tonight with gifts of the Holy Spirit to build up the Body of Christ. Your gift is your staff. So each of us is called by God to be like Moses, to pick up our staffs and be the presence and power of Jesus everywhere we go.

I want to close with a prayer from St. John Eudes:

"O Divine Spirit, I give myself entirely to You. Take possession of my soul, direct me in everything, and grant that I may live as a true child of God, as a true member of Jesus Christ; grant that, born of you, I may totally belong to You, be totally possessed, animated and directed by You. Amen."