

13TH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME, JULY 2, 2017
ST. MARY CATHOLIC CHURCH, RICHMOND VA
FR. MICHAEL A. RENNINGER

“MY VERY DEAR SARAH: THE INDICATIONS ARE VERY STRONG THAT WE SHALL MOVE IN A FEW DAYS. LEST I SHOULD NOT BE ABLE TO WRITE AGAIN, I FEEL IMPELLED TO WRITE A FEW LINES THAT MAY FALL UNDER YOUR EYE WHEN I [AM DEAD]...”

THAT IS HOW HE STARTED THE LETTER TO HIS WIFE. IT WAS JULY 14, 1861, AND SULLIVAN BALLOU, A YOUNG MAN FROM RHODE ISLAND, WAS AT AN ARMY ENCAMPMENT NEAR WASHINGTON DC. THE CIVIL WAR HAD BURST ACROSS THE AMERICAN LANDSCAPE WITH BLOODY RESULTS, AND THE FUTURE OF THE NATION WHICH CAME TO BIRTH ON JULY 4, 1776, WAS VERY MUCH IN DOUBT.

SULLIVAN DID NOT PICTURE HIMSELF A HERO. HE HAD TWO SONS BACK HOME, AND HAD SERVED IN THE LEGISLATURE. BUT WHEN THE WAR BROKE OUT, HE VOLUNTEERED TO SERVE.

WITH THOUSANDS OF OTHERS, BALLOU ENDURED THE HEAT AND COLD OF MILITARY LIFE. THE DISEASE. THE HORRIBLE SANITARY CONDITIONS.

IN JULY OF 1861, IT BECAME CLEAR THAT THE ARMIES OF NORTH AND SOUTH WOULD SOON FACE EACH OTHER – AT A BATTLE IN NORTHERN VIRGINIA.

SWELTERING IN THE HEAT, FACING HIS OWN MORTALITY, SULLIVAN BALLOU WROTE A LETTER TO HIS WIFE. AND IN THAT LETTER, HE SAID THE FOLLOWING:

SARAH, I KNOW [THAT] AMERICAN CIVILIZATION NOW [DEPENDS] ON OUR VICTORY. [WE OWE A] GREAT DEBT TO THOSE WHO WENT BEFORE US THROUGH THE BLOOD AND SUFFERINGS OF THE REVOLUTION. AND I AM WILLING — PERFECTLY WILLING — TO LAY DOWN MY LIFE, TO HELP MAINTAIN THIS GOVERNMENT, AND TO PAY THAT DEBT ...

SARAH MY LOVE FOR YOU IS DEATHLESS, IT SEEMS TO BIND ME WITH MIGHTY CABLES THAT NOTHING BUT OMNIPOTENCE COULD BREAK; AND YET MY LOVE OF COUNTRY COMES OVER ME LIKE A STRONG WIND AND BEARS ME UNRESISTIBLY ON... TO THE BATTLE FIELD.

LISTEN TO WHAT SULLIVAN BALLOU IS SAYING TO HIS WIFE! HE UNDERSTANDS WHAT IS AS STAKE IN THE NATHIONAL CONFLICT. HE RECALLS THOSE WHO SACRIFICED FOR OUR NATION TO BE BORN.

SULLIVAN WRITES ELOQUENT WORDS OF LOVE TO HIS WIFE.... AND HE ALSO WRITES ABOUT HIS LOVE FOR HIS COUNTRY. YOU CAN ALMOST FEEL THE TENSION IN HIS HEART: HE LOVES HIS FAMILY! BUT IN THAT MOMENT, HE ALSO FEELS CALLED TO SERVE SOMETHING EVEN BIGGER THAN HIMSELF, BIGGER THAN HIS FAMILY, BIGGER THAN HIS OWN LIFE.

SULLIVAN BALLOU CONCLUDES THIS AMAZING LETTER WITH THESE TENDER WORDS TO HIS WIFE:

BUT, O SARAH! IF THE DEAD CAN COME BACK TO THIS EARTH AND FLIT UNSEEN AROUND THOSE THEY LOVED, I SHALL ALWAYS BE NEAR YOU; IN THE GLADDEST DAYS AND IN THE DARKEST NIGHTS ... AND IF THERE BE A SOFT BREEZE UPON YOUR CHEEK, IT SHALL BE MY BREATH. SARAH DO NOT MOURN ME DEAD; THINK I AM GONE AND WAIT FOR THEE, FOR WE SHALL MEET AGAIN ...

SULLIVAN BALLOU DIED ONE WEEK LATER AT THE FIRST BATTLE OF BULL RUN. HIS WIFE RECEIVED HIS LETTER FOUR MONTHS MONTHS LATER.

THE FIRST TIME I HEARD THE WORDS OF THIS LETTER, I CRIED. I CRIED BECAUSE THIS YOUNG MAN FROM RHODE ISLAND ELOQUENTLY EXPRESSED SOMETHING WHICH WOMEN AND MEN OF EVERY GENERATION HAVE FELT, STRUGGLED WITH, AND SOUGHT TO EXPRESS.

THIS YOUNG MAN FROM RHODE ISLAND GENUINELY LOVED HIS FAMILY AND FRIENDS. HE LOVED HIS LIFE. AND YET HE FELT CALLED TO SACRIFICE FOR SOMETHING BIGGER THAN HIMSELF. EVEN IF THAT MEANT THAT HE HAD TO LET GO... TO LET GO OF FAMILY, RELATIONSHIPS, SAFETY, EVEN HIS OWN LIFE.

IN 1776, THERE WERE WOMEN AND MEN IN AMERICA WHO WERE WILLING TO SACRIFICE THEIR LIVES, FORTUNES AND SACRED HONOR BECAUSE THEY BELIEVED IN SOMETHING BIGGER THAN THEMSELVES... A NEW KIND OF FREEDOM, IN A NEW NATION.

IN 1861, THERE WERE WOMEN AND MEN IN AMERICA WHO WERE WILLING TO SACRIFICE EVERYTHING, BECAUSE THEY BELIEVED IN SOMETHING BIGGER THAN THEMSELVES, AS OUR NATION CONVULSIVELY DEALT WITH HORRIBLE LEGACY OF SLAVERY.

IN 1941, THERE WERE WOMEN AND MEN IN AMERICA WHO WERE WILLING TO SACRIFICE EVERYTHING BECAUSE THEY BELIEVED IN SOMETHING BIGGER THAN THEMSELVES, AS NAZI AND JAPANESE TYRANNY HAD TO BE CONFRONTED.

IN 1961, THERE WERE AMERICANS WHO MADE SACRIFICES BECAUSE THEY BELIEVED IN SOMETHING BIGGER THAN THEMSELVES, AS PRESIDENT KENNEDY INVITED A NEW GENERATION TO JOIN THE PEACE CORPS AND TO GO ABROAD AND MAKE A DIFFERENCE.

WHETHER IT IS SOLDIERS WHO RISKED EVERYTHING IN KOREA, VIETNAM OR THE MIDDLE EAST... WHETHER IT IS AID WORKERS AND DIPLOMATS WHO VOLUNTEER TO GO TO DIFFICULT ASSIGNMENTS...

WHETHER IT IS YOUNG PEOPLE WHO DECIDE TO BECOME POLICE OFFICERS OR FIREFIGHTERS AGAINST THEIR FAMILY'S WISHES...

WHETHER IT'S THE TALENTED YOUNG MAN WHO GIVES UP THE PLANS FOR MEDICAL SCHOOL SO THAT HE CAN GO TO SEMINARY TO BECOME A PRIEST, OR THE TALENTED YOUNG WOMAN WHO GIVES UP THE LUCRATIVE BUSINESS PATH IN ORDER TO TEACH IN THE INNER CITY...

WE ARE INSPIRED BY WOMEN AND MEN WHO FEEL CALLED TO SERVE SOMETHING BIGGER THAN THEMSELVES, EVEN IF THAT MEANS THAT THEY HAVE TO SACRIFICE THE NEARNESS AND SUPPORT OF FAMILY AND FRIENDS.

THERE WAS A TALENTED YOUNG MAN FROM GALILEE WHO ALSO FELT CALLED TO SACRIFICE EVERYTHING SO THAT HE COULD SERVE SOMETHING BIGGER THAN HIMSELF. HIS PARENTS DIDN'T ALWAYS UNDERSTAND WHAT HE WAS DOING. LOCAL LEADERS TOOK OFFENSE AT HIS WORDS AND DEEDS.

HE PUT HIMSELF IN DANGER. BUT THIS YOUNG RABBI FROM GALILEE, WHO HAD BEEN BORN IN BETHLEHEM AND RAISED IN NAZARETH, KNEW THAT HIS LIFE WOULD ONLY MAKE SENSE BY SERVING SOMETHING, SOMEONE, BIGGER THAN HIMSELF.

AND THAT YOUNG MAN, JESUS, SAYS IN TODAY'S GOSPEL:

"WHOEVER LOVES FATHER OR MOTHER MORE THAN ME IS NOT WORTHY OF ME,

AND WHOEVER LOVES SON OR DAUGHTER MORE THAN ME IS NOT WORTHY OF ME;

AND WHOEVER DOES NOT TAKE UP [THEIR] CROSS AND FOLLOW AFTER ME IS NOT WORTHY OF ME.

WHOEVER FINDS HIS LIFE WILL LOSE IT, AND WHOEVER LOSES HIS LIFE FOR MY SAKE WILL FIND IT.”

AT FIRST, THESE WORDS OF JESUS MAY SOUND HARSH. “IF YOU LOVE YOUR PARENTS MORE THAN ME, YOU’RE NOT WORTHY OF ME... IF YOU LOVE YOUR CHILDREN MORE THAN ME, YOU’RE NOT WORTHY OF ME.”

NOTICE, JESUS NEVER SAYS, “DON’T LOVE YOUR FAMILY.” RATHER, HE IS INVITING US TO ALSO FALL IN LOVE WITH SOMETHING BIGGER THAN OURSELVES, BIGGER THAN OUR FAMILIES, BIGGER THAN OUR DREAMS.

WHEN WE FALL IN LOVE THAT WAY, WE ARE WILLING TO SACRIFICE, AND SERVE, AND FOLLOW THAT DREAM WHEREVER IT LEADS.

OF COURSE, JESUS IS NOT REFERRING TO ANY SINGLE NATION, OR POLITICAL CAUSE. HE IS NOT ASKING EVERYONE TO START A MILITARY CAMPAIGN.

JESUS IS INVITING EVERYONE TO CONSIDER THE POSSIBILITY THAT WE COULD FALL SO IN LOVE WITH THE LORD AND HIS GOSPEL THAT WE ARE WILLING TO SPEND THE REST OF OUR LIVES PUTTING THE GOSPEL FIRST, PUTTING JESUS FIRST, MAKING HIS TRUTH OUR PRIORITY.

WHEN PEOPLE DEDICATE THEIR LIVES TO A SPECIFIC CAUSE, WE OFTEN CALL THEM HEROES. WHEN PEOPLE DO THAT FOR THE GOSPEL, WE CALL THEM SAINTS.

AS WE CELEBRATE INDEPENDENCE DAY, PLEASE TAKE TIME TO THANK GOD FOR THE PEOPLE WHO HAVE HELPED TO MAKE OUR NATION WHAT IT IS – A BEACON OF FREEDOM, WITH A FLAWED PAST.

A NATION OF GENEROUS PEOPLE WHO ARE IMPERFECT HUMAN BEINGS. A NATION WHICH HAS DONE SO MUCH FOR HUMANITY, AND WHICH STILL HAS MUCH TO DO.

LET US PRAY FOR OUR NATION, OUR GOVERNMENT, EVERY NEIGHBOR.

AND, IN YOUR PRAYER THIS WEEK – PONDER YOUR DIGNITY AS A BAPTIZED BELIEVER. WE BELONG TO SOMETHING MUCH BIGGER THAN OURSELVES.

WE BELONG TO THE CHURCH OF CHRIST, THE WORLDWIDE COMMUNITY OF BELIEVERS. WE ARE BAPTIZED INTO CHRIST, SO WE BELONG TO HIM.

HIS GOSPEL IS THE SOURCE OF MY TRUTH, AND THE PATH FOR MY LIFE. LISTENING TO THE LORD, SERVING THE LORD, SHARING HIS GOOD NEWS, THAT IS THE GREAT VOCATION GIVEN TO EACH OF US.

AND EVERY DAY, KEEP YOUR EYES FIXED ON JESUS – THERE IS NO ONE GREATER WORTH LOVING.

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