

19th Sunday in Ordinary Time
St. Mary's Church, Richmond VA
Fr. Michael Renninger

They live outside of Philadelphia. They were married about 7 years ago, and ten months after their wedding they found out that they were pregnant. Several months later, they gave birth... to triplets!

They haven't slept since!

When they found out that they were pregnant, they started to do all of the things that you usually do to prepare for the arrival of a child.

They went to birthing classes; painted the nursery; purchased a warehouse full of diapers. They did everything they could think of to be prepared.

But when I spoke to this couple a few weeks after the birth, they told me that despite their best efforts, they were NOT ready the arrival of the babies!

The mother of the babies said: "no matter how many birthing videos you watch, NOTHING can prepare you for what childbirth is really like! Despite your best efforts, nothing can really prepare you for dirty diapers, sleepless nights, and projectile baby puke!"

And the mom also said to me- "Oh, by the way: nothing can prepare you for the feeling that you get when you hold your baby for the first time, or how it feels when they fall asleep in your arms."

This mom said: "I *thought* I was prepared. But most days I'm not sure what to do next. What I DO know is - HOW MUCH I LOVE THESE BABIES - and that gets me through the hard stuff I wasn't prepared for."

In today's Gospel parable, Jesus tells us that *we must be ready* for his arrival in our lives. We must *be prepared* for his coming. We don't know where or how Christ will intervene in our daily lives, so we must be prepared, like servants awaiting their master's return. "Be prepared," Jesus says.

But in my experience, no matter what I do to TRY to be prepared, God has a way of surprising me, asking me to do what I least expected. Try as I might, pray as I might, I find myself surprisingly unprepared when God asks me to grow, or change, or do.

Am I just a spiritual slacker? Or, am I missing the point of today's parable?

Maybe today's second reading can give us a clue. The author of the Letter to the Hebrews uses Abraham and Sarah as examples of people who had REAL faith, in God. "Faith,"

the author says, “is the realization of what is hoped for and evidence of things not seen.”

Abraham was a person of faith. But notice how that faith is described. When God asked Abraham to leave home, Abraham said ‘yes,’ even though he had no idea where the promised land was. When God told Abraham to enter the promised land, he said ‘yes,’ even though he could not see how he was to settle there.

When God told Abraham and Sarah that they would have a child, they both believed that this could happen, even though both of them were so old that no one thought they could conceive a child. God was constantly surprising Abraham and Sarah, constantly asking them to believe that good things would happen, even though they could not see how it would work out.

How did Abraham and Sarah trust and believe? Well, the one thing we know about Abraham and Sarah is this: they LOVED the Lord...and they knew that the Lord loved them.

And because they loved the Lord, they trusted when God asked them to do what they weren’t prepared for; they believed when God made promises that made no sense; they trusted even when God asked them to do something that wasn’t easy; they were willing to change their whole lives based solely on God’s promise.

Love is the only thing strong enough to overcome our fears and our questions.

Love makes it possible for us to do the hardest things.

The mother of triplets knew how much she loved those babies. That’s what gave her strength to do the hard tasks of parenthood.

Sarah and Abraham loved God, and knew that God loved them. That’s what gave them strength to do the hard tasks on their journey.

So when Jesus invites us to ‘be prepared,’ perhaps he’s inviting us to *love God so much*, and to be aware of *how much God loves us*, so that when God surprises us we will be able to trust the Lord, simply because we love the Lord.

We will be able to say, “Lord, I have no idea where this is headed, or how it’s working out, but I know that you love me, and you will not let me down in the end.”

“Be prepared” means “fall in love...with Christ.”

God is in *every* surprise. So you don’t have to panic when life throws the unexpected at you:

+ when your son tells you he’s being deployed overseas; when your daughter tells you that she is pregnant; when your dad tells you that he has cancer; Christ is there, even when it’s hard, even when it’s hard to see Him.

+ when your job falls apart; when your marriage falls apart; Christ is there, even when it's hard, even when it's hard to see Him.

+ when you struggle with how to forgive the one who hurt you; when you have fears about what is happening in your neighborhood, or your church, or your world; Christ is there, even when it's hard, even when it's hard to see Him.

+ when you fall in love; when you hold your child for the first time; when you experience ecstasy and passion and joy and beauty; Christ is there, even if His face is hidden below the surface.

When Christ calls us to love – when Christ calls us to follow him – he is inviting us to a hard and demanding vocation. Love is never easy. Just ask Mr. and Mrs. Shaia, who recently celebrated their 70th wedding anniversary. They will tell you that love is hard, and that love is worth the work.

I love our country. I trust you do to. Recently I've been heartbroken, because the country I love is struggling. We are all concerned, I think, about shootings, and stabbings, and angry rhetoric, and the playing of the blame game. Too many voices are screaming at us, demanding that we hate each other.

But – *hate* is easy. *Love* is hard.

Blame is easy. *Solutions* take work, and thought, and prayer, and humility. *Solutions* take love.

If you listen to the shouting voices on TV, you get the impression that the causes of our problems are easy to identify and the solutions are easy to articulate.

But blame is easy. As Christians, we are called to reject the divisive language of the blame game, so that we can follow the Holy Spirit's lead.

Jesus is calling us to reveal the healing power of his love. And love is never easy. We have hard work to do. Hard conversations about mental health and gun laws; hard conversations about what happened in El Paso and Dayton and what continues to happen in Chicago and Baltimore. Hard conversations about evil and forgiveness, the dissolution of the family and the nature of racism. Complex problems require thoughtful dialog, loving dialog.

As my grandfather used to say, the important things in life are never easy. But they are always worth the hard work.

The God who surprised Sarah and Abraham by calling them to a hard vocation is still calling women and men to the hard work of love.

Fall in love with the Lord. That's how you'll trust him, even when you can't see him.

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