

The Church of Saint Pascal Baylon

Fr. Mike Byron, Pastor: Sunday Homily

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When I drive here to church each day I usually take 3rd Street all the way from downtown. Last year, as you may know, they closed 3rd Street between Earl Street and Johnson Parkway. So I had a dilemma. I chose to take Pacific Street on the other side of the freeway until I could cut back again on Johnson.

This year, of course, they closed 3rd Street from Johnson Parkway to White Bear Avenue. So I had another dilemma. I cut up Johnson to 6th, came past the high school to Flandreau and then back here, swerving around the “Road Closed” signs.

Sometimes when I’m running late I’ll just take the freeway to White Bear Avenue and come directly here, although now you can’t do that either. So I turn left on Wilson and right on Flandreau, again, squeezing past the “Road Closed” sign on Conway so that I can get to our small parking lot near the office.

Are you finding this homily tedious yet? I am. But it is in order to make a point, and it’s this: I know that I have to get to St. Pascal’s somehow each day, and if the tried and true and simple ways don’t work, I don’t have the option of giving up. I know what I need and it’s up to me to find a way to get it, and in the past many months that’s meant that I’ve had to change the way I do things, not change the goal of getting to work. It’s less convenient, but that’s the way it is.

In today’s first reading from the Book of Exodus, Moses knew what he needed to do, namely, to defeat the Amalekites in battle. And at first, he knew exactly how to do it—he would stand on the top of the hill with the staff of God in his hand. Whoever controls the top of a hill in a conventional war is the winner. But soon he discovered that that wasn’t enough; he also had to keep arms raised up in order for the battle to go well. I’ll bet he’d have preferred not to have to do that, but that’s what was needed to attain the goal. And then when things didn’t go quickly, he had to change again. Rather than standing, as he’d announced as his plan, he had to sit on a rock because he grew tired. And when even that didn’t work to accomplish the goal, still other decisions had to be made. His cohorts Aaron and Hur had to hold up his arms for him. I wonder whether Moses felt a little humiliated by then. After all, consider the difference between Charlton Heston, perched alone, standing tall on the hill with the staff of God, glaring down at the enemy forces below—and Woody Allen sitting on a rock too weak to raise up his own limbs. Not a very threatening sight. But Moses knew what had to be done—at whatever cost to himself—in order to attain the goal of victory.

My getting to St. Pascal’s in the morning has not been exactly epic Holy Warfare, but the point is the same: you do what you have to do, even when it’s exasperating or maddening. And the message in the gospel today, not coincidentally, also is the very same one. It is important to recall that St. Luke sets up this parable, about the persistent widow seeking justice from the corrupt judge, by telling us that it’s a story about prayer. Which begs the question, what is the ultimate goal or purpose of praying? From this parable it surely seems that the goal is simply to persist in the practice of it, regardless of any immediate outcomes. The goal is to become a person who prays.

That may sound obvious or simplistic, but we all know people—maybe even ourselves from time to time—who give up on prayer or despair of faith because it “doesn’t work,” meaning that it doesn’t produce the expected or desired results for them.

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Which again, ought to occasion the question, what exactly is the goal that I am seeking when I pray—the truly ultimate goal? Too easily we can slip into thinking that the goal is to get what I want, as if the purpose of prayer is plea bargaining. But that's not it. The purpose, the final point, of praying is to deepen a personal relationship with God, regardless of the immediate outcomes. That persistent widow in Jesus' gospel parable was a person who I think could be described as a resolute demander of justice, and when she didn't get it she neither changed the goal nor gave up the quest. She remained true to the reason for her being. In the case of this story, she ultimately got what she wanted, but it's pretty clear that even if she had not she would have not abandoned the goal.

So if the purpose of prayer is a deep, personal union with God, it seems pretty clear that the quickest way to *not* discover that purpose is to abandon prayer. I think that's Jesus' point in this gospel. If we are not persistent in prayer, then maybe it falls to us to ask the question of what we expect to be the result of it. Perhaps we have mis-identified the final goal. Persevering in healthy relationships is its own goal, and that's what we're here to do every Eucharist that we celebrate. When it also gives us the comforts and rewards that we desire, so much the better—but that's not what is ultimate here. What is ultimate is knowing that friendship with the Lord—and with his Church—is the first and lasting reason why we gather here. Like that pesky widow, may we always keep sight of the goal.