

The Church of Saint Pascal Baylon

Fr. Mike Byron, Pastor: Sunday Homily

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February 19, 2017

Several years before his death, my father underwent fairly serious heart surgery at Fairview Southdale Hospital in Edina. He was there for several days, and one Sunday afternoon I went to visit him. He could hardly believe the story he had to tell me. He had had a visitor earlier that day, but when the visitor arrived, he found my father sleeping and didn't want to wake him. So he just sat there next to the bed for a few minutes and said a few prayers. Then he scribbled a note on a slip of paper just so that Dad knew he had been there, and promised continued prayers for him. That visitor was our then-Archbishop Harry Flynn. Dad was absolutely astonished—and so was I. They knew each other somewhat, but could hardly have been called close friends.

But that's the kind of thing that Archbishop Flynn did all the time, quietly and without public notice. He still does that today. I know because I hear stories of similar amazement from people who simply can't believe the degree of compassion he expresses for people when he certainly wouldn't have to, and it isn't expected to in his retirement. When my father died several years ago, Archbishop Flynn came to the funeral and offered a few beautiful remarks after communion. Incredible. And unforgettable.

Some 40 years ago there was a great flood along the Zumbro River in Rochester. My elderly, arthritic grandmother lived as a widow along the river and was part of an evacuation order to get her out of her home. Eventually, the whole neighborhood was flooded. They were sending all the residents to an emergency shelter in a school gymnasium. My grandmother was so crippled up that she could hardly walk. Her pastor at St. John's Church knew that, and so he sent a car for her to come and stay in the rectory until the danger was over and she could return to her home. He didn't have to do that. Nobody expected that. I never once met Fr. Joseph Mountain, who is now long deceased, but I will never forget him for that.

When I was 10 years old, we had a terrible fire in our family home and we were displaced for months. I and all of my siblings were taken in by various friends of our parents, to give us a safe place to stay while we could figure out where to live in exile while the house was rebuilt. I noticed the obituary of one of those friends in the paper this week. They didn't need to do that. Nobody expected that. But I will never forget it, with gratitude and a little bit of amazement.

These are just three stories from one person's life—mine. I share them in order to awaken an awareness that every one of us could tell stories like that if we were to think about it...people who have stepped into our lives in ways both large and small, who have provided care and compassion both visibly and invisibly, not out of any sense of obligation or guilt or coercion, but just because of who they were or are. These are people who have cultivated the heart of love and charity over the course of their lives, not because the law or the church said that they had to, but because of a solidarity with the suffering and vulnerable that made any other choice unthinkable.

Nobody develops a heart like that merely by ticking off a checklist of required behaviors, like "Get to Mass," or "Say Your prayers," or "Give This Money," or "Follow the Rules." Sure, that's all good and important, but not nearly sufficient.

And that's *exactly* what our Sacred Scriptures are speaking about today as we worship. In the First Reading from the Book of Leviticus, which is the Rule Book par excellence in the whole Bible, Moses tells the people that the rules are there in order to make people *holy*, not to make them self-satisfied, or smug or condemning of others.

They are meant to help us be transformed into people whose first and automatic response to need is to provide an over-abundance of care and sacrifice...not because it's expected or required, but because it's needed.

The work of charity is not some sort of *quid pro quo*, returning kindness or unkindness to others in proportion to what they have shown us. Any pagan or unbeliever can do that, and often enough does *exactly* that. "Holiness" as the Bible teaches it, does not mean "fairness." It means unconditional generosity, sometimes for over and above what we may think people are owed or have earned. That's not strictly "fair." But it's our call. It's what Archbishop Flynn does, and what Fr. Joseph Mountain did, and what my parents' friends did and what Jesus did—and what he commands *us* to do in today's gospel.

As he continues to teach his Sermon on the Mount, he contrasts merely doing what we are *supposed* to do, in order to stay out of hell and damnation, with what we are being *invited* to do, who we are being invited to *become* as people of virtue and faith. Sure, let's not harm each other, he says, and let's not be petty, and vicious and merely "fair." This is a gospel that summons us to imitate the very life of *God*, who doesn't keep a score card about who's been naughty and who's been nice. He's just, and generous and merciful to *everyone* and *everything* that he has created. And sometimes that is most astonishingly obvious when His goodness extends to people who clearly don't seem to have earned it or deserve it. That's where the power—and yes the clear challenge and discomfort of this gospel—is so vividly exposed.

Pray for your enemies? Give *more* to the beggar than what they ask? Serve beyond what everybody expects of you? Strive to be perfect—like God? If that doesn't unsettle us at its hearing, then we're not hearing, or we are drowning out this very blunt message with some other, more alluring and false siren song. I'd like to suggest a little bit of spiritual homework, having heard these gospel commands of Jesus again today. I hope that it will be a source of encouragement and gratitude. Specifically, reflect about some of your own amazing stories about people who have shown astonishing charity, forgiveness, hospitality and courage to you and to your family for NO merely human reason at all, but simply because of a heart that has been so closely conformed to Jesus that they could not have acted otherwise.

We live in a moment in which it is so easy to be cynical, and to imagine that the only reason people act charitably is that there's something in it for them. Even in religious practice that's not uncommon, i.e., to do good stuff because it will result in some immediate or eternal reward for me and my tribe. That's not the gospel we hear in today's reading. Let us pray in our Eucharist to aspire to the same perfection that God is, and to get there through the same kind of life that Jesus and so many of our personal heroes have shown us—the way of outlandish self-offering.