

The Church of Saint Pascal Baylon

Fr. Mike Byron, Pastor: Sunday Homily

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I have been dragged very reluctantly into each new phase of the information-technical revolution of the past 30 years. Up until about two years ago, I did not engage in text messaging. I assumed it was difficult for someone like me to learn, and I didn't *want* to learn how. I came eventually to discover that it is extremely easy, and sometimes actually convenient. I now receive and send texts all the time on my phone. But one of the things about texting is that every message that is exchanged is attached to a phone number—not a name. I regularly receive messages from phone numbers that I don't recognize. In some cases, it's spam, but often enough is a message from somebody I actually know, but don't have programmed into phone to recognize him or her by name. And it's always *my* choice to name somebody.

I just had an exchange yesterday with a phone number, a person wanting to know if I would talk to his friend about a personal matter regarding the church. The message called me by name, but I had no idea who it was. And who would know how to find me on my personal phone? Before I agreed to take the conversation any further I had to text back that I was sorry, but who *are* you? Turns out it was a college buddy of mine whom I've known for almost 40 years, but he's not in my phone index because he rarely calls otherwise. Once we got that identification situation cleared up, I told him I'd be happy to help. I know him, and I trust him. He wouldn't knowingly put me into an uncomfortable or dishonest situation with his friend. And if he's his friend, I trust him, too.

There are some conversations or exchanges of information that I simply won't engage without knowing the person with whom I am communicating. It requires a relationship first before I'm going to feel safe to, for example, get sarcastic on electronic media, or before I will express a controversial opinion. It's not like the old days, before texts and email, when casual conversation could be just face-to-face. Today there's that nasty button on the key pad labeled "forward," and suddenly words take on a life of their own. That can be dangerous.

But in another way, it *is* kind of like the old days, because as our gospel tells us today there have always been the so-called "thieves and robbers" who have tried to persuade the sheep that they should trust them, and follow them. Technology has only made it easier, and faster and more treacherous and confusing. When Jesus speaks of the Shepherd and the sheep in the gospel, he is—of course—using a metaphor, a figure of speech to describe the relationship between himself and his disciples. It's about *people*, not animals. And the message is clear: you can't follow me if you don't first know me. If this gospel story were written today, perhaps it wouldn't have had the thieves and robbers climbing over the fence. It would have had them texting the sheep to meet them at the gate, using nothing but a phone number. Not a name, not a relationship.

In some ways, we people of faith are the easiest to fall prey to that kind of manipulation because we are the most ready to trust in the essential goodness of human beings and the honesty of their intentions. And that's good. But the thieves and robbers know that about us. And so do some self-appointed evangelists. We are often the softest of targets when the religious swindlers come around. Without an enduring relationship with our Shepherd, our God, we are vulnerable, and we'd better know that. Nobody's name gets programmed into my smart phone before I have been convinced that I know them, trust them and am open to hearing from them when they call. All other phone numbers receive a healthy dose of suspicion—as they should. "Who are you?" And why should I respond to your call—or text?"

Today we are honored to welcome our children to the table of the Eucharist for the very first time. What a blessing for all of us! They are excited, and so are we. And I'm assuming that every single one of them has a parent, a grandparent, or a guardian who has reminded them over and over, "Do *not* follow or obey a stranger." And they are here because they have trusted the voices of those who parents and guardians and teachers who have told them, "This is important. This is the most sacred thing in which you will participate—communion with Jesus." And they are right about that. We follow the words and wisdom of those whom we know and trust, as the result of an enduring relationship. Even when it may be difficult or unpleasant, we follow the voice.

This is exactly what our Lord begged us to do, and it's a message for absolutely everybody here, no matter our age or experience: Trust the voice you know. For as special as today is for our young people, it won't mean much going forward unless it is the expression of a life-long relationship with Jesus. There is only one time that we celebrate our First Holy Communion. But it's only the beginning of a way of life that we learn to trust and follow every week, every year, for as long as we are here. First Eucharist doesn't mean One-time Eucharist! We can't learn to trust the Shepherd's voice if we don't get used to hearing it, day by day, year by year. It's why we keep coming back. We have a Savior, Jesus, who is happy to speak to us and feed us for as long as we are willing to have that happen. What a joy. What a blessing.