

The Church of Saint Pascal Baylon

Fr. Mike Byron, Pastor: Sunday Homily

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Sometimes when I accompany people who are touring our church building for the first time—especially children—I ask them to tell me what is the most important piece of furniture in this space. And without knowing anything about theology or liturgy, they almost always get it right. They point to the altar table and say, “That thing.” “Why do you say so,” I ask? And they respond, correctly, that it is made out of solid granite, is positioned at the very center of the space, and is about three steps higher than almost everything else here. How you arrange the furniture says a lot about what you value, and what you believe. And you will also notice that this altar table is not far away from those who would wish to sit up front, near to it during mass. Unlike the olden days, it is not set against the back wall of the building, accessible to only a select few—mostly ordained. This is *our* table, not mine. And more importantly, this altar announces by its very location that God’s grace is **HERE**—all over the place—not just “over there.” God doesn’t have to be rationed out like a scarce commodity. God is already gushing forth in every corner of this sacred space.

And the priest who leads us in worship is not the sieve or the gatekeeper or the bottleneck through which all graces flow from God to everybody else. He is merely the one who remembers and articulates out loud what all of us ought to already know: That God is here whenever and wherever Christians meet around the altar for Eucharist. Abundant. Not rare. It matters where we place the table. It announces the convictions of our faith.

Back in Jesus’ time in Jerusalem, there were other tables set up between the entrance and the altar. But unlike this table, the tables of the money changers were not intended to welcome people in. They were meant to filter some people out, to keep God at a certain distance from those who couldn’t pay for the privilege to come inside.

As if God was scarce, and his love comes in limited amounts for the good-enough few. That’s nonsense, as Jesus saw it, nonsense worthy of becoming angry about. And he did.

Here at St. Pascal’s we have a lot of tables, frequently enough in our gathering spaces. And often enough they are used for selling goods and services to benefit our parish activities. But notice where they are. There is no table blocking the doors into church. Nobody is ever forced to spend money for the privilege of being a part of this praying community. Anybody is free to ignore those tables if they wish. God comes to them anyway! It matters where we place the tables. It announces the deepest convictions of our faith.

And the next time you pass through Brioschi Hall, take a look at all those tables—all the meeting places where God’s grace is shared among families, friends, guests and strangers. So much of God’s welcome poured out and shared among so many—abundant, not scarce. In this season of Lent we are made to be busy about our various disciplines of prayer, fasting, and almsgiving. We are invited to be more deliberately attentive to how we live for others and not only for ourselves. But in all our pious practices, we should never fall into the false idea that God comes closer to us or cares about us more as the result of certain specific activities that we engage in. God’s love for us is not the result of some transaction, like paying money or saying prayers, or performing certain good works. It is not as if God’s grace is scarce and far away and has to be coaxed out of Him through table dealings of dollars and cents.

This is the only table that matters here, and it is always available to anybody, anytime, free of charge. From this table comes a flood of graces, not drip, drip, drip of favors from a reluctant God through an ordained minister who controls the flow of heavenly favor. Jesus' righteous anger in today's gospel was directed against those whose attempts were to make God too scarce, too far away, too unavailable to the ordinary person. For the most of us who are ordinary persons, that is the most liberating and joyous news of all. So may our Lenten devotions be an expression of gratitude for the God who is already here, lavish in his love, and not desperate attempts to gain God's affection—as if He didn't already desire to share it.