

The Church of Saint Pascal Baylon

Fr. Mike Byron, Pastor: Sunday Homily

1757 Conway Street • St. Paul, Minnesota 55106 • phone 651.774.1585 • e-mail church@stpascals.org

March 18, 2018

Recently I was speaking with a pastor friend of mine. We are roughly the same age and he's been a very competent and successful leader of several parishes over the course of many years. He is not entirely happy with his current assignment and is looking forward to making a move before too long. His next parish, he figures, will probably be his last one before retirement and so he'd like it to be a good fit. He's willing to wait for that opportunity.

And then as we spoke further he began to get a bit philosophical—even theological. At his age—our age—he said, one can start to wonder whether a person has done that singular thing for which his life was intended. By the time you're almost 60 years old, you've done a lot of work, had a lot of important life experiences, and if you're a good priest, you have touched a lot of lives in important ways.

But it also means that very often you've been doing the same activity over and over again without a clear sense of whether any *particular* task really matters very much. Is there much meaning, for example, in presiding over your 400th wedding or your 500th funeral or your 2,000th daily mass or visit to the hospital? It isn't entirely clear exactly when the great purpose for your life has taken place, or whether it has yet to occur. I know I've quoted the wisdom of the philosopher before who said that every person's life is lived forward but understood backward. Which is to say that every new day to which we awaken, every new person we meet, every new engagement with community is necessarily a mystery as to how it's going to turn out, and to how important ultimately it is. We can't know in advance. And to the extent that we ever do know, it's only in hindsight. Every person's life is lived forward but understood backward.

Last week, right here in this church, a woman appeared in the pew for daily mass. I didn't recognize her at all, but she asked if she could have a minute of my time afterward. She had come all the way from Hopkins that morning just to see me. When we met together she told me that I had given a Lenten reflection talk at her parish some 20 years ago—a talk I didn't remember giving at all and one of hundreds that I've done over the years. She didn't remember anything about the content of the talk either (so I knew she'd found the right priest ☺), but what she does remember is that she pulled aside later on and told me about a spiritual journey she was on and a particular project that she was trying to accomplish—a project that kept getting derailed by a whole series of pastors at her church.

Apparently, I listened respectfully, and, in the end, I told her to never give up on that dream, no matter how long and difficult the road would be. And she didn't. And last week she was weeping as she told me that her priest now is actively encouraging her to finish the task to which she felt called all those years ago. She had come to St. Pascal's that day just to say thank you, and to give me a big hug. So, was *that* the great ministry, that one thing, for which I was put on this earth? Maybe. I'll never know for sure. But if so, then what have I been doing here in ministry since the Clinton administration? And maybe that one thing won't actually begin until tomorrow.

I'm recalling all of this because of today's gospel, and frankly, I'm a bit envious of Jesus. He seemed to know beyond any shadow of a doubt just exactly what he was sent here by God to do in his life, where all his activity was leading him, and even the very hour in which "The Son of Man would be glorified." Here we are on the threshold of that one big thing.

That's a knowledge and a confidence that nobody else has ever had—at least not from among the *sane* people. For him it all seemed so clear in this gospel of John. For us it can all seem so foggy. And stepping into the fog can be a very good way to translate the meaning of what Jesus describes as “dying to self,” or “hating one's life in this world.” It's another way of speaking about handing over control of one's life without completely understanding what that will require of us, or whether our mission will be accomplished. That is the demand of truly *paschal* Christian discipleship—to live forward without yet fully understanding backward...to live at *each* moment in the confidence that God has a firm purpose for our being and our being *together* now—and sometimes not having much more than *that* to rely on.

Fog, in and of itself, is not scary or dangerous. But it is disarming and disorienting sometimes when we are made to just *be* in it, and it can become dangerous when we are in too much of a hurry to respect its demands and its claims on our plans.

Jesus knew that his one big thing involved his necessary physical death, because he knew of his heavenly Father's desire to rescue the world somehow in and through his suffering. But beyond that, there may well have been a lot of fog—even for Jesus, even during Holy Week. His gift to God, and his example to us, was to step into the fog of Jerusalem and Calvary. Next weekend we will remember it all again as we hear again the Passion of the Lord.

So to return to my pastor friend's question, perhaps the framing of the matter in terms of “one big thing” isn't very helpful—at least not if it refers to one single moment or to one discrete accomplishment. For everyone of us who call ourselves Christian, the “one big thing” is to remain faithful, both when life makes sense and when it doesn't...both when the vision ahead seems crystal clear and when it is completely shrouded in fog. And to be even more specific about it, the so-called “one big thing” is really more about a “One Big Who,” and we follow that “Who” in 1001 different smaller “things” throughout our lives, even those things that lead us into fog.

Whether we are 95 or 15, whether we are single, married, divorced, widowed, ordained, healthy, feeble, confident or afraid, it is God who summons us to faithfulness until the day of our last breath. Forward we go into Calvary's fog.