

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

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In every church where I have ever served there are people who appear at the doors in order to request assistance for basic human needs—like food, transportation, or a place to spend the night. And with those requests come stories of suffering. Those people speak about sick or dying relatives who live far away and whom they must visit. Or of being stranded far from home, or of not having eaten for days. Some of those stories are true. Very many of them are not. But lots of those folks are experts at lying. This past week, a family appeared in our parking lot in their car. They just parked there for quite a while. Finally, I went out to ask what was the situation. The man said that they were living in their car and needed shelter. He told me that he had come here two years ago and that the reverend had personally taken them to the Motel 6 and paid for a room for them. I believed him because I was the reverend in question and I remember doing that. But he had no memory of me, and when I informed him that I was the reverend, the story started to change. Suddenly he needed gas rather than a room.

It's easy to become cynical in the face of repeated encounters like that, and that is a very dangerous and non-Christian disposition to carry around. It is to be resisted. And yet, desperate people often lie about what they really need. Not always, but often. That is where a true Christian disciple has to be wise in learning how to be generous without becoming a fool. That's not easy. I'm sure I have given more money than not to people like that over the years, where my charity was used for something other than I was told it would be. At some point you just have to trust, either that the story is true or that it isn't. I gave the man \$5.00 and told him to get some gas, but I doubt that he did.

Truly to trust people means that you first have to know them. Almost always when desperate people appear at the doors of church to request assistance, it is the first and last time that I ever see them. Sometimes that truly isn't their fault. Sometimes it's because they are very good con artists. The Sacred Scripture tells us that we are always to welcome the stranger with hospitality—and that is certainly true. But we are also to be discerning about those who arrive only to take advantage of that under false pretenses.

The gospel today speaks of an apparent stranger who arrives in the upper room in Jerusalem—a ghost, they believed—who came with a story that stretched the limits of belief—that he had been dead and now was living and, oh by the way, to you have any food to give me? Let me take from what you have.

And the disciples bought it. They gave the fish to this man in spite of a story that nobody had ever been told before—one that was quite literally unbelievable, apart from faith. The story of a crucified and buried friend of theirs who was now claiming to be hungry and standing right in front of them, as a physical person. Why would they do that? Were they simply foolish?

Not at all, they did it because they *knew* him. This was not the first time they had seen him. Those scars on his hands and feet were scars that they well remembered, and they knew the truth of where they had come from. They knew who he was. This Jesus was not a con artist, pretending to be needy. He was now enfleshed in every human person and community that is poor, suffering, and lacking in the basic provisions for survival.

His question to his friends in Sacred Scripture is a disarmingly simple one: “Do you believe me?”

“Do you believe me?” And, “If you do, what are you prepared to do in response? Am I merely a ghost after the events of Easter? Or am I truly alive in the flesh and blood of those who need your compassion and treasure? (If not your fish!) Is the risen Jesus just a memory, or a philosophy, or an historical curiosity? Or is he the one who keeps showing up, day by day, 2,000 years later, in very human, physical form, with the request to be noticed and provided for?” “Do you believe me?”

If we truly know him, we will believe. Which means that it’s our responsibility truly to know him. And we do that, day by day, week by week, through immersing ourselves in the places where he has promised to be present—in the Sacred Scripture that he has urged us to study, and in the Christian community with whom he has promised to remain—*especially* when that community gathers for Eucharist. It is very physical, very concrete.

This Easter time for Christians is not merely a time to recall a happy memory of a long-ago miraculous event. Jesus is alive among us not merely as a ghost with an unlikely story to tell, but as true humanity with real, physical needs to be served. We must be dedicated to recognizing him exactly there, and our gathering right now is the first and most important act in beginning to do that. Eucharist.