

Eighteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time (2016)

Last Sunday I went to Mass with my brother David and his wife Doris. We went to a beautiful old church in Southbridge, Massachusetts - Notre Dame. It was built by proud French Canadians who came to Southbridge in the early twentieth century to work in the mills. It always amazes me to see the grand edifices that were built by hardworking immigrants who loved God and wanted to express that love with beautiful churches - French Canadians, Irish, Italians, Germans, Poles, and so many others.

We were there because my brother and sister-in-law participate in a program called "Unbound." This is an international program which seeks to help poor families throughout the world. In this program, people sponsor a child or an elderly person and their families by sharing a monthly gift of \$36. Once you have chosen a person to sponsor, you receive information about that person and his/her family. And then a personal relationship begins through periodic updates and letter writing back and forth. My brother and sister-in-law have been sponsoring two children - one in Kenya and one in Columbia – for many years. They were at Notre Dame to help sign up new sponsors. They also chose a third child, also from Columbia, for their three grandchildren to sponsor. We heard a few days later that 72 people became sponsors that day.

After Mass we chatted about the program and about personal PRIORITIES. They told me that they CHOOSE to forgo certain luxuries in order to be able to sponsor these children and their families. So rather than go out to dinner at a nice restaurant a couple of times a month, they eat at home. They use the library often rather than purchasing books and movies. They have a large vegetable garden. The money they save can then be used for this PRIORITY in their lives.

I'm proud of my brother and sister-in-law. A few years ago, after completing the Just Faith Program, they took in a family of Burundi refugees into their home for six months and helped them learn English, helped them find jobs, and an apartment. Today they continue to have a relationship with them and have even been asked a number of times to be godparents and to stand up at weddings.

I know I'm bragging about them, please forgive me, but I use them as an example. They have made a CONSCIOUS and DELIBERATE CHOICE to use many of their

resources to help others. For them, religion and faith is much more than just attending Mass on Sunday. It's about living the whole week with the needs and concerns of others in mind. It is about sharing what you have with others, especially the gift of ourselves.

In today's gospel, we heard Jesus tell us to avoid greed and to be more concerned about the things of heaven than our possessions - the things of earth. He told a parable about a foolish man who had his priorities and his values all messed up. He was so proud of himself for his earthly success but instead of sharing it with others, he stored it for himself and the night after erecting new storage barns for all his stuff he died. How sad. He spent his life amassing wealth for himself and in the end what good was it all? He could have shared so much with others but he kept it all for himself.

The parable is meant to disturb those of us who may have our priorities and values messed up; for those of us who live by the maxim, "rest, eat, drink, and be merry!"; for those of us who are attached to our possessions and are more concerned about having the newest gadget and fanciest car than we are about the children who go hungry each and every day in so many places throughout the world; for those of us who forget that all that we have been given by a generous God are meant to be shared with generous hearts; for those of us who are blind to the needs of others or just plain greedy.

Jesus isn't the only one who mentioned greed in our readings today. St. Paul, in the second reading, tells us to put to death the parts of ourselves that are earthly, immoral, impure, evil and greedy. If we are now members of the body of Christ then we need to seek what is above. We are to seek the things of heaven. And what are the things of heaven? They are all those things that fulfill the soul - faith, hope and love, charity, mercy, forgiveness, reconciliation. They are the things that fulfill the soul and raise us up. They are the things that make us Christ-like. They are the things that make us more human, more alive. We are not just physical bodies walking around satisfying our physical needs. We are bodies with souls and our souls are eternal. We must attend to our souls not just our bodies.

The definition for the word GREED is the excessive desire to acquire or possess more than we need or deserve, especially with regard to material wealth.

We are told to avoid greed because greed is not life giving, it leads to spiritual death – the death of the soul. Rather than having an excessive desire for the things of earth, we are called to have an excessive desire for the things of heaven: faith, hope, love, charity, forgiveness, reconciliation, spiritual fulfillment.

Qoheleth proclaimed “vanity of vanities, all things are vanity.” The translation for the word “vanity” (hehbel) is a breath of air - a puff of air. Qoheleth is saying that so often those things upon which we spend so much time, energy and money are just a puff of air. We spend our days working and struggling for things that in the end do not fulfill our deepest longings. They do not enliven the soul. They are just a waste in the end.

Think about all the things we worry about, stress out about, and are anxious about. Much of it involves money and material things. Will I have enough? How can I get more in order to be secure? And when we have things we stress out them. The first dent in a new car, a scratch on a new iPhone, etc. What a waste of time and energy, when we could be directing our time, energy, attention, and yes money to those things that really matter – loving and caring for each other and for others who are suffering, hungry, lonely, in need.

We are invited today to reflect on our PRIORITIES and VALUES, that which is of highest importance. That which gives life to the deepest part of ourselves - our souls and that which gives life to others. Are we giving too much attention to things that will not last, things that are of little value or are simply vanities? Things that are here today and gone tomorrow? Things that, in the end, are like a puff of air? Oh vanity of vanities, all things are vanity!