

29C 2019 SML
LK 18:1-8

I remember a day a few years ago that was a very tough day for the Swift Family. Tough, in that we received a one-two punch from life that just knocked us to the mat. And the Swifts are no different than any other family, because every family, sooner or later, gets a one-two punch that knocks you to the mat. To be honest, that wasn't the Swift's first one-two week, and it won't be our last. And as we were getting up, and people of faith always get up, because we are always given the grace from Almighty God to get up, my niece's response was, "I am so sorry. I guess I didn't pray hard enough."

How many times, in life, do we blame the one-two on God, or we blame the one-two on ourselves, when we say we just didn't pray hard enough. Yet, at other times, we say we just could not have prayed any harder.

If our thought process is that prayer needs to be hard in order for it to be answered, which frankly, could be a take away from today's Gospel. But that take away is on the wrong track, as I'm quite sure that God does not want prayer to be hard for any of us. A better way to phrase it would be that prayer not be hard, but constant. And the more constant prayer is, the more

comforting prayer becomes. But the word “hard” needs to be taken out of the sentence. The word “hard” needs to be taken out of the equation. Prayer should not be hard as much as prayer should be “always.”

I recently finished a book entitled MOVE. MOVE is a book based on a survey to find out which of the many activities and programs churches offer deliver the greatest spiritual growth in their people. In other words, the survey wanted to identify which activities were most effective in helping people grow in their love of God and love of others. The results of the survey included 1,000 churches and over 250,000 congregants over a four year period.

The results of the survey divided respondents into one of four categories. Either they're:

- ✓ Exploring Christ, or they're
- ✓ Growing in Christ, or they're
- ✓ Close to Christ, or they're
- ✓ Christ Centered.

For the purposes of this homily, I'd like to concentrate on the Close to Christ profile, as their definition of someone close to Christ is where I suspect most of us would want to be but

perhaps are not quite there, let alone Christ Centered. A person who is Close to Christ:

- ✓ makes their relationship with Jesus part of their everyday life
- ✓ is confident in God's presence and power
- ✓ connects daily with God through personal spiritual practices
- ✓ and is the backbone of the Church.

For those in the Close to Christ segment, faith is deeply personal and significant in their every waking moment. Faith is no longer defined by Mass once a week, but rather, those Close to Christ are more deeply invested in their faith, and are willing to publicly identify themselves as followers of Christ, inside or outside the walls of the Church.

Those Close to Christ continue to demonstrate their love of God with ongoing, regular communication and through personal spiritual practices. Stated simply, they pray. And in addition, their increasing love for others shows up through increased service activities. Stated simply, they volunteer, or better yet, they minister.

However, the characteristic that most significantly defines people who are Close to Christ is the high degree of ownership

they take for their spiritual journey. Unlike those who are Exploring Christ or Growing in Christ, the faith of those Close to Christ is not dependent on spiritual mentors, dynamic preaching or compelling scripture studies. Yes, they believe that going to Church is essential to their ongoing spiritual growth, but they take much of the responsibility for advancing their own relationship with Christ in addition to going to Church.

Let's take a look at the weekly obligation of going to Mass. You heard me correctly, the weekly obligation. Not when it's convenient, not regularly, but weekly. Show of hands: how many were taught that in Catholic School or in CCD? I was. That teaching has not changed. The weekly obligation to fulfill the third commandment "to keep holy the Lord's day," by receiving Holy Communion "in memory of Me."

Some will retort. I couldn't come once a week. I don't get much out of the Mass. I'll reply using St. Paul's analogy. Living the Christian life is like being an athlete:

- ✓ running the good race,
- ✓ fighting the good fight,
- ✓ winning the crown.

I've mentioned several times in homilies of encounters I have at the gym. My exercise of choice is the gym. If I were to

work out at the gym once a week, I took could say I don't get much out of my workout. Not once a week. Four or five times a week yes, but not once a week.

For those who do not get much out of the Mass, I answer it's because you are not coming enough. Mass once a week with an average seven minute homily isn't going to cut it. You'll need to take responsibility for your spiritual life and do more:

- ✓ perhaps Mass several times a week; we have members here at St. Mary of the Lakes, as there are members in every parish who are daily communicants;
- ✓ scripture study: SML offers more than a few. I just began teaching a six week series last week; there's five more nights if you'd like to come
- ✓ joining a small group: in a parish this size, you can't know everybody, but you can know somebody;
- ✓ adoration of the Blessed Sacrament; Jesus is here 24/7, any time, day or night.
- ✓ spiritual reading: there's a list of books I recommend in this week's bulletin
- ✓ confession. It's instantaneous forgiveness. Right away. No waiting. At the gym, you'll need to spend months losing the weight you want. Not confession. Boom. Forgiven!

Those Close to Christ still look to the Church for support, but they have learned to push themselves, to develop their own personal relationship with Jesus through an ongoing dependence upon God's grace. When asked what they want from their Church, four out of five say they want to be encouraged to take personal responsibility for their own spiritual growth, and that's exactly what I'm doing in this homily.

Across the board, those Close to Christ read, reflect on Scripture, go to confession, listen and pray to God in Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament, join a small group.

Those Exploring Christ pray like this. "God, if you're there, please let me know" or "God, if you'll do this, then I'll believe."

Those Growing in Christ tend to pray about day-to-day issues, turning to God for support as they would to a friend, or praying morning and evening prayers, or prayer before meals.

For those Close to Christ, prayer becomes more of a running dialogue, a conversation with God that they return to throughout their day. Those Close to Christ no longer wonder how a person might obey Jesus' instruction in today's gospel about "the necessity to pray always without becoming weary."

Because, for those Close to Christ, that's exactly what they are doing.