HOLINESS & PERFECTION: WHY EVEN TRY?

The Word of God this weekend presents a challenge, like bookends, the Old Testament reading and the gospel. The first words we heard from the Book of Leviticus stated: The Lord said to Moses, "Speak to the whole Israelite community and tell them: Be holy, for I, the Lord, your God, am holy." The last line we heard from the gospel of Matthew was a similar impossible-sounding command: So be perfect, just as your heavenly Father is perfect." Holiness and perfection! Do any of us really think these words apply to us?

So many people have a mistaken notion of what “perfection” and “holiness” mean in a biblical sense – as a spiritual reality. I read a sad story about a young woman whose life was waylaid for years by a mistaken pursuit of perfection. She said: As a young adult, I agonized over what career path to pick, wanting to pick the perfect job that would be my dream career. I was desperate to be the best, wanting to be the perfect employee, and giving nothing less than 150 percent in every project I worked on and presentation I did. I was terrified to make a mistake and required excellence in every task. I was afraid of others judging me. I didn’t see my mistakes as learning experiences; I saw them as a way of others seeing what I didn’t want them to see: that I was flawed, imperfect, and somehow not good enough. I demanded perfection in every part of my life, and the area I struggled with the most was the desire for body perfection.

I don’t think our good God and our gracious and loving Savior gave us the commands to strive for holiness and perfection in an attempt to make our lives miserable. He gave us those biblical imperatives as a way to set us free.

As many of you know, last weekend I was in Michigan and Ohio to preside over the funeral services for my oldest sister Mary Ann. She was a member of a small community of nuns, the Servants of Jesus, who minister in the Archdiocese of Detroit and other places in Michigan. Perhaps the message I shared at her funeral may shed light on today’s scriptures. My sister Mary Ann was a gift-giver. She seldom showed up for a visit with my other sisters without a trunk load of gifts. These included a lot of practical items which most of us really wouldn’t think of as gifts – rolls of paper towels, tissues, toilet paper, hand soaps and laundry soap, bags of candy and cans of nuts. Of course, when she scoured the paper for 2-for-1 coupons, she probably thought she was saving family members the trouble of coupon hunting. She took literally the words of St. Paul that were read at her funeral Mass: God loves a cheerful giver. I believe that her gift-giving habit later in life – some thought it an ‘obsession’ – when her health was poor and she wasn’t able to carry out any active ministry, was a way of compensating for the pastoral service she could no longer offer to others as she did in former years.

Many years ago Mary Ann gave me a couple gifts that I keep in my bedroom; they’re never far from me. One is this small, black and silver crucifix. I know it was very special to Mary Ann because it contains the
relics of her Franciscan patron saints – Sts. Francis and Claire of Assisi, St. Anthony of Padua and the patron of the Felician Sisters, Felix of Cantalice. The crucifix, the cross on which Jesus was hung, is, for many of us, a sign of the self-giving love of Christ, the “dying to self” which is at the core of the Gospel message. In the passage from John’s gospel that was proclaimed at her funeral, the key to Christian living is placed before us as a stark choice. Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world keep it for life eternal. To our contemporary Western ears the admonition to hate your life sounds too strong. A more accessible translation might be: “anyone who holds on to life just as it is, destroys that life. But if you let it go, reckless in your love, you'll have it forever, real and eternal.”

The relics in that cross are the presumed remains of followers of Jesus, Franciscan heroes, who tried to live the Christian message in its fullness and to give themselves to that enterprise of loving recklessly and with abandon. They experienced God working in their lives and generously shared those experiences with others. That cross serves me daily as a reminder of the highest striving of our Christian calling and the riskiness of faith. It’s the call of today’s scriptures -- from the Book of Leviticus: Be holy, for I, the Lord, your God, am holy; and from Matthew’s gospel: So be perfect, just as your heavenly Father is perfect." We are to imitate the love that Jesus bore for us by his Passion, Death and life-giving Resurrection no matter what our state in life, no matter what gifts life bestowed on us or what limitations it has placed on us. This striving for divine holiness, this reach for Christian perfection always beckons us to set our sights high.

The second gift Mary Ann gave me that’s always close at hand is this laundry bag – probably another one of the items she found on sale. The white ink on the black cloth bag has faded over the years, but it says: “Soiled in the U.S.A.” That’s a takeoff on Bruce Springsteen’s popular song from the 80’s, Born in the USA. I’m sure my sister didn’t select it for that reason – she wasn’t too hip to popular culture. But, every time I throw my dirty laundry in this bag I think of my sister… and the reality of my own human frailty. For all the lofty ideals we’re commanded in the scriptures, for all our efforts to be the best we can be as clergy and parishioners, as parents and grandparents, as siblings and friends, in whatever our line of work or school or ministry, we often fail, and sometimes we fail miserably.

Just as at the end of the day we get rid of our dirty laundry and throw it into a bag or a basket to be washed and cleaned, the setting of the sun brings an examination
of conscience that often reveals a missed opportunity, a misspoken word, or a mangled conversation, which failed to bring Christ’s presence to another. Each new day, then, brings a fresh opportunity to begin again, to rise from our missteps and put our feet once again on the path to sanctity and holiness. Anne Sullivan, an American teacher best known for being the instructor and lifelong companion of Helen Keller, and who assisted her in overcoming unbelievable limitations once said:

*Keep on beginning and failing. Each time you fail, start all over again, and you will grow stronger until you have accomplished a purpose – not the one you began with perhaps, but one you’ll be glad to remember.*

A week from Wednesday is Ash Wednesday and the beginning of our annual Lenten journey. It’s an opportunity for each of us as individuals and as the community of the Church to hear again the call to sanctity and perfection and to acknowledge the roadblocks on that path, confident that, by God’s grace, we will receive the strength and wisdom to become all that God has called us to be.

*John Kasper, OSFS*

So my sister left me these two gifts for which I will be eternally grateful: the encouragement to strive for sanctity each day – to *be perfect just as our heavenly Father is perfect*; and the realization that God indeed writes straight with crooked lines. The All-Holy One will use me and you and all of us, fragile earthen vessels, as he used my sister, to achieve his purpose and bring about his Kingdom.