

WEEK THREE March 7 Third Sunday of Lent: Relevant Teaching

One year ago today I was packing for a trip to Nashville, Tennessee with a priest friend of mine.

Neither of us had been there before, had heard great things about the city, so decided, "let's go!".

Little did we know it would be our last trip anywhere for a long time.

The morning of our departure from DC we were sitting at the airport and breaking news of the coming pandemic filled every TV screen.

Our hope for a 'fun escape' diminished each day we were away.

By Friday - the day we flew home - Masses were canceled, then schools, businesses, and soon, pretty much everything shut down.

SCREEN: Covid reminders poster

Within a few weeks, we all learned the things that could keep us healthy and safe:

wash your hands, wear a mask, and practice social distancing.

Easy to remember, pretty simple, and really practical.

At first, these things felt strange, even made us uncomfortable.

They took some getting used to.

But now, a year later, they've become second nature.

We've learned what to do to keep ourselves and others healthy.

SCREEN: Grow Your Faith main screen

This is week three of our Lenten message series titled, Grow Your Faith.

Over these six weeks we are focusing on ways that God uses to grow our faith.

Our goal is to arrive at Easter as more fully committed disciples of Christ.

Week One I talked about daily practices that help us grow our faith - like prayer and reading scripture.

Last week I talked about how God uses the highs and lows of life to grow our faith.

This week, I want to focus on relevant teaching.

Relevant teaching.

What do I mean by this?

When something is relevant it is both true and practical.

It applies to you and actually helps you navigate your way through life.

When a teaching is relevant, you don't see it as something imposed by another person, but as helpful for your well being.

For example, as a toddler I was taught not to touch a hot stove.

It was a rule imposed by my mom, but I soon discovered it was helpful and true and it became second nature - *stove hot, don't touch!*

As a teen I learned the rules of driving - really practical and still relevant.

When it comes to COVID,

we've learned what's important and helpful.

The same is true when it comes to keeping our spiritual lives healthy.

There are things that God teaches to grow our faith.

But here's the thing about knowledge;

you can know it all,

you can learn and study and fill your head with tons of information on any subject.

But it can't help you until you put that knowledge to practical use.

With spiritual knowledge - God's teachings - it should transform you and the world around you.

And that's the lesson in the scriptures we just heard.

SCREEN: Ten Commandments

In today's first reading God gave the Israelites the Ten Commandments.

It was his gift to keep his children close to him and living in harmony with each other.

And talk about practical teaching.

They weren't complicated or deep - you didn't need an interpreter to make sense of them.

Here's the Ten Commandments in a nutshell:

- *put God first,*
- *honor God and your parents and your spouse, and*
- *don't lie, steal, or kill, or envy what others have.*

And here's the amazing thing about the Ten Commandments:

they were given over 3,000 years ago and are relevant for our lives today.

They are the basis for law and society the world over.

So it's relevant, helpful teaching.

But unless the Commandments make their way into a person's heart, unless they are practiced every day, they remain nice words carved in stone.

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Which was the situation Jesus faced in today's Gospel.

The people of his day knew the commandments 'up here' - everyone had been taught them from an early age - but that knowledge hadn't reached their hearts so it didn't change their behavior.

Jesus saw so many discrepancies in how the religious leaders and authorities were living their faith.

See, they really were the know-it-all's when it came to the teachings of the faith. But when you looked at what was going on in the Temple in Jerusalem, you could see how far they'd strayed from the true love and worship of God which the Ten Commandments demanded.

When Jesus saw it, he became angry.

But his anger was controlled, it was focused, no one was physically hurt.

His point was, *"you've created hundreds of rules, you've devised elaborate rituals for worship, but they haven't actually brought you closer to God or others."*

As I said, our focus in today's message is on how God can use practical teaching to grow our faith.

So Jesus's message should serve as a wake up call, to make sure we don't end up like the people he met in the Temple; knowing a lot about faith or religion but not growing any closer to the Lord or to others.

What can help us?

First, ask yourself this question:

with everything that I currently know about God and faith, has it helped me to be more loving,

more forgiving, and more joyful?

Because knowledge that doesn't affect your behavior, and doesn't change the way you live, is useless, it's irrelevant.

When knowledge is relevant it changes you and the world around you.

You suddenly become aware of problems like inequality, injustice and intolerance and refuse to live with it.

Again, relevant knowledge transforms your world and the world around you.

Otherwise it's like a book on a shelf collecting dust.

When spiritual teaching is relevant to you,

you want to know more about God and your faith.

So, here's an analogy that might make this clearer.

If you've been fortunate enough to meet the love of your life,

think back to when you first met - when you first felt the stirrings of love.

You wanted to know everything about this person -

their background, their likes and dislikes, what makes them happy or sad - everything.

Why did you want to know all this?

So you could love them more!

That's the goal of spiritual knowledge: .

the goal is to help you love God more.

And I don't know about you, but I've discovered that when I follow

God's teachings, I'm happier - I'm more attuned to God.

I'm able to hear his voice, see where he's leading me,

and I'm more open to opportunities that God presents for me to serve him.

In other words, my faith grows stronger.

And as a young man, I learned the hard way that when I ignored God's teachings,

and decided to do my thing and go my own way,

I was not as attuned to God's voice, I got lost, I missed the opportunities offered.

That's what relevant teaching can do for us.

It helps us every day to grow into the loving, committed disciples

that Jesus needs us to be.

What can help you to discover this relevant teaching?

God's Word, the Bible, is essential.

Everyday I read and pray with scripture....everyday.

And every time, every time,

I read at least one thing that helps with something I am struggling with.

But it's not a daily practice only for priests or nuns,

but for everyone who is serious about growing their faith.

SCREEN: spxbowie.org/lent

Throughout these 40 days of Lent,

I've invited you to join me in experiencing the power of God's Word

by reading and praying our way through the Gospel of Matthew.

If you haven't done so already, just go to the Lent page of our website

where you'll find a guide we created with a chapter or section of a chapter for each day, along with some instructions to help you pray with scripture.

In this next week we will be reading chapters 10-13 of Matthew's Gospel.

As you read and pray these passages,

I want you to write down anything that feels particularly relevant to you and something you may be dealing with in your life right now.

If you are dealing with a family crisis, this week you will read what Jesus has to say about families.

If you are unsure what being a disciple is all about,

Jesus will tell you this week.

If you're facing persecutions or struggles in living your faith, you'll read what Jesus has to say to help you.

My greatest hope is that this daily practice will

become a habit between now and Easter and that you will continue it for the rest of your life.

Relevant teaching - not for information but for application.

Without it, we can get confused or lost.

With it, God will grow our faith. Amen. +