

Grow Your Faith: Service That Changes Us.

I would like to begin by congratulating my good friends, St. Pius parishioners Dave and Rose Tully on the birth of their first child, who was born on January 5th.

Screen: [Picture of Tully family]

Cindy and I are so excited for them as they begin their journey as parents. What an awesome gift from God for two awesome people. We have been and will continue to pray for them, and I ask you to do the same. Speaking as a parent, I can confidently say that their lives have changed...forever!

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Seeing the newborn pictures of Henry took me back to the birth of my oldest daughter, Emily.

Cindy and I had been married for almost five years before Emily was born. Five years, all to ourselves! It was awesome. I was in the Marine Corps and since we didn't have kids, Cindy and I would do everything together. We were footloose and fancy free! We could go just about anywhere we wanted whenever we wanted. Life was good, and it didn't seem like it could get any better. But, that soon changed.

I will never forget looking down at my newborn daughter Emily's face for the first time. Tears welled up in my eyes; I was speechless. I remember the flood

of emotions that washed over me -- incredible joy, but simultaneously fear and doubt knowing (without really “knowing”) that our lives had changed, forever. We soon learned that being parents would stretch us in unimaginable ways to love and care for Emily and our other children. The people we were ceased to exist. We learned that parents never stop serving their children, and we are still serving our children to this day.

Screen: “Grow Your Faith” (series slide)

This is the final week of our preaching series, “Grow Your Faith.” During the series we have focused on ways that we can grow our faith during Lent, in preparation for Easter. In the first four weeks, we looked at how 1) daily habits, 2) recognizing God in highs and lows, 3) relevant teaching and, 4) other people can help us to grow our faith. This week, I would like to focus on how **Service that stretches you, that changes you** -- gets you outside your comfort zone -- can help you to grow your faith. Today’s Gospel is a great place to start.

Most of us have heard Jesus’s words from today’s Gospel:

Screen: “Unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies it remains a single grain. But if it dies, it produces much fruit.”

It’s not an accident that we read this Gospel today, just as a week before Palm Sunday, when we will recount Jesus’s passion and death. Jesus is clearly

talking about himself in today's Gospel, and the fact that he will need to die before he can be raised up in glory on Easter. But, he is also talking to us.

Screen: “Grow Your Faith” (series slide)

I have always wondered if what we heard in today's Gospel is actually scientifically true. Does a seed actually die so a plant can grow? So, I Googled it and found the website: “Two Minute Theology, by Alex.” This is what “Alex” had to say:

For the longest time I drew issue with this language, that a seed would need to die in order to become a plant...Mostly because, in my mind, a seed doesn't die when it becomes a plant. Quite the opposite, in fact; a seed is full of the potential of life... as it becomes a plant! The problem, though, was with how I viewed the process. I was looking at it from a...scientific perspective. The seed is planted, it undergoes some sort of process...and then a sprout appears, and grows into a full fledged plant. But what of the seed? Can you dig up the plant, and find it's seed down at the bottom, with “plantybits” growing from it's insides? No! It's essentially died to itself! It ceases to be a seed in order that the plant [can] live; it can no longer find it's identity in that of it's old self, a seed. And in this way, it has died, it has ceased to exist as it's original self. It's become something far

different, and lives a new kind of life. From the “potential” of life that is contained within the seed comes a new life, capable of producing fruit.

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Like the seed in the Gospel, our lives are filled with many deaths and rebirths. And, with each rebirth we are given a new opportunity to serve others. Many of these opportunities come at natural transition points in our lives: When we get married, our life as a single person dies; when we start a family, our life as a childless couple dies; and as we raise our kids, we experience many more “deaths” -- and undergo profound changes -- as they grow from infants to toddlers to school age to high school and beyond. And, each of these transitions -- if we do them well -- require us to become less selfish, less focussed on our needs, and more focussed on serving the needs of others...our spouse, and our children. We essentially live to serve them, and to help them grow into loving and faith filled people. In each case, these deaths happen whether we are ready or not. And, when they do happen, whatever we have known and been accustomed to, dies. And, just like the seed in the Gospel, our old self disappears and we change into something new and different. And, in the process, our faith grows.

(Besides parenthood,) We also experience many other opportunities in our lives to serve others, and to stretch past our comfort zones. These experiences can change us just as profoundly.

I've been asked many times since my ordination, "What do deacons do?" Most people see deacons assisting at Mass, but 2000 years ago, the first deacons were called to serve those in need. When the early church was growing by leaps and bounds, the Apostles needed help caring for all its members, so they appointed deacons. Thus, the deacon's primary ministry is service.

I'd like to share an experience with you that I had 15 years ago doing just that kind of service. The experience was very meaningful for me. It changed me, and in the process grew my faith.

Screen: [Picture of Richard's Place]

Back in 2005, I volunteered at *Richard's Place*, a home for people living with HIV and AIDS. Here's a short excerpt from a reflection I wrote the day after one of my volunteer experiences:

On Wednesday I spent time with Ty. Ty is dying. He's blind, and his whole left side is paralyzed. He is in a lot of pain, and cannot get out of bed anymore. He is in hospice and only receives medication to help with the pain. He will die soon.

Ty was released from prison several weeks ago to come to Richard's Place to die. The previous Wednesday, Mike, my site mentor, asked me if I wanted to talk with Ty. Surprisingly, the invitation caught me by surprise even though I came to Richard's Place as part of my deacon formation program for exactly that reason -- to be with people living with and dying from AIDS. But, now that it was real I realized that I had never really thought about what it would be like to have such a raw experience: to meet and talk with someone dying of AIDS. I felt like I was not prepared to support Ty; to answer his questions; to be there for him, to be with him as he approached the end of his life. I prayed a lot that week, asking God for courage and wisdom, and when I arrived that Wednesday, I told Mike I would like to talk with Ty.

When I walked into the room I saw Ty lying on the hospital bed. We made small talk at first: he asked me about my job and my deacon program and then he asked me if I believe in life after death. I responded "yes," and asked him the same question. He answered "yes," but added that he had done very bad things during his life and he asked me if I thought he could still go to heaven. I told him that God is merciful and forgives even the most serious of sins. At that moment, Mike walked in to bring Ty his medications and silently signaled to me that it was time to go. I told Ty I had to leave and asked Ty if he would like me to

come to talk with him again. Ty said yes. (pause) Ty died a few days later, and I did not get another chance to talk with him.

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My experience with Ty was profound and life changing. To this day, the images of Ty's room are as vivid as that night back in 2005, at Richard's Place. As I think back on the experience, I realize that on that night, I was God's ears, listening to Ty's regrets; and, I was God's voice, assuring Ty of God's mercy and forgiveness. But, this could only happen because I was willing to make space for God by emptying myself, letting a part of me die...like the seed in today's Gospel -- so that God could fill that empty space and in the process grow my faith.

Whether you are a parent or whether you have volunteered at a homeless shelter, Habitat for Humanity or at a place like *Richard's Place*, you have probably experienced how service can and does change you and how in the process the experience can help to grow your faith -- just like the grain of wheat Jesus refers to in today's Gospel. This is such a wonderful message as we begin the last week of Lent before Palm Sunday and the beginning of Holy Week.

As Lent comes to an end, this is a perfect time for us to really stretch ourselves to serve others in a way that can truly allow God to change us and to grow our faith. There are many ways to experience this type of life changing service that do not require you to meet someone who is dying of AIDS, like I did.

You just need to think about the people and situations in your life that you shy away from, or situations that you feel a bit unprepared for, like listening to a friend struggling with sadness or stuck in grief, where your patience may be wearing out. Or, maybe you have a relative with dementia and don't want to keep having the same awkward conversations with them over and over again. Or, maybe you are avoiding someone with an addiction, because you don't want to get pulled into the messiness and drama that it has created. We all probably have someone in one of these or a similar category in our lives. In every case, you have the opportunity to be like the seed that dies in order to produce much fruit, if you are willing to let God stretch you into service. Now is the time -- as we come to the end of Lent -- to empty yourself; to reach out to them; to connect; to listen; to allow yourself to be God's ears and God's voice to them. Amen.