

Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross

September 14, 2019

St. Mary Parish, Marshall

8:30 a.m.

Encountering Christ: Joyfully Unleashing Your Gifts-Stewardship Retreat

Today's Feast is special---it's unique---but, in some ways, especially to those who don't have the gift of Faith, it's a Feast that is quite strange, perhaps even bizarre!

The cross stands at the very center of our Christian Faith, both historically and symbolically. Yet, the cross is an instrument of tortuous and ignominious suffering and death. For Jesus too---if it had not been for the Resurrection---the Crucifixion of Jesus, the Son of God, would have been the most heinous crime and egregious sin humanity ever committed.

But, there **was** a Resurrection---Jesus overcame the power of death. And so, the Cross has become a symbol of our salvation, and an everlasting sign of God's amazing Love, and a sign of Hope to all who believe in and follow Jesus.

Whether it's standing high atop the spire of this Church, or whether it's the cross that remained standing behind the main altar, surviving the great fire at Notre Dame Cathedral on Holy Tuesday this past year, or whether it's the little cross that many of us wear around our necks---we respect and find hope in every sign of the Cross.

We're all familiar with that powerful, very short prayer, attributed to St. Francis of Assisi, which we pray at the beginning of each of the 14 Stations of the Cross, and which most of us have committed to memory: *"We adore You, oh Christ, and we praise You; because by Your holy Cross, You have redeemed the world."*

The Scripture Readings we just heard, proclaimed for this powerful Feast, don't focus directly so much on the Cross, but they perfectly capture the meaning of the reality of what the Cross means, or should mean, for all of us.

We heard about the Israelites in today's First Reading from the Book of Numbers. Remember the context: they had suffered for generations from cruel slavery in Egypt until God had mercy upon them, raised up Moses to get them delivered from slavery; and God promised that Moses would lead them to a life of

freedom---into the Promised Land. But to get there, they had to travel thru the desert. Because of hard-heartedness and turning away from God, that trip thru the desert turned into a “wandering in the desert” for 40 years. Yet, God remained always with them, and miraculously sent them food every day (quail and manna), and water from a rock. That’s where we see them today----“Why have you brought us up from Egypt to die in this desert?”We are disgusted with this wretched food.” That was the constant sin of the Israelites---of humanity---of not being satisfied with what God provides; we want what WE want! Of course, that goes back to Adam and Eve and the first sin....not satisfied obeying God’s ONE restriction; they wanted that too! And the result has plagued humanity for all time! So poisonous snakes, known as “seraph serpents” came among the people as a punishment and they began to die. THEN, they came to their senses, once more, and repented; and when Moses fashioned the bronze serpent on a pole, raised it up, and the people looked upon it, they were saved.

‘THAT’s what Jesus refers to when speaking to Nicodemus in today’s Gospel passage: *“Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, so that everyone who believes in Him may have eternal life.”*

But it’s St. Paul who pulls both of these Readings together, and gives us the spiritual meaning and what the essence of this Feast is all about, when he writes to the Philippians this morning, and to us, this most beautiful Hymn of Exultation of Jesus: *“Christ Jesus, though He was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God something to be grasped; Rather He **emptied** Himself,.....He **humbled** Himself, becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross. **Because of this,** God greatly **exalted** Him.*

The lesson that Adam and Eve had to learn, the lesson that the Israelites had to constantly learn, the lesson that humanity has had to learn, the lesson that you and I are still trying to learn is: we must **empty** ourselves of us, and **fill** ourselves with Christ. Until we can do that, we will keep “wandering” thru life, like the Israelites did in the desert, without having a “clear sense of direction” and a “defined purpose and meaning” to our lives.

It’s very early on a Saturday morning. And yet, here you all are---coming for this Retreat Day with the theme of “Encountering Christ”. While you could be doing lots of other things on this beautiful late-summer September Saturday, what could be MORE important than focusing on what admittedly is the most important spiritual goal for every one of us?!_We have been baptized into Christ.

We have been baptized into His death and resurrection. Our spiritual journey is not just about the final destination---hoping that we squeak into Heaven on a wing and a prayer---but it's about focusing on Heaven as our destination by consciously living in THIS world following Jesus.

And to do that, we have to know Jesus intimately; we have to love Jesus with our whole heart, soul, mind and strength; we have to be willing to serve Jesus in the least of His/our brothers and sisters; and we have to be ready to empty ourselves of US and fill ourselves with Jesus. Or as St. Paul told us today, and just as Jesus did, we too must empty ourselves, humble ourselves, ridding ourselves of pride and self-will and focusing on being obedient to and conforming our wills to be united with God's will. Then, and only then, can God exalt us---raise us up---fill us with His Love. And THEN, we are able to "joyfully unleash the many gifts God has given us", in the spirit of true stewardship, for the needs of the Body of Christ.

Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI said it so profoundly, yet simply, in one of his many writings: "Our faith is not about dogmas; it's about a Relationship." That relationship is with Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior, our High Priest and Good Shepherd, our Brother and our God. It's not enough to know about Jesus; we have to know Jesus. And we have to allow Jesus to know you.

However you feel about the most special human relationship that you have; for those who are married, that would be your spouse; for others of us that would be our best friend or confidant. How you know one another, completely and totally; how you don't just love that person, but you are "in love" with that person who becomes the center of your world. THAT is how we must come to know and love Jesus, and to allow Jesus to know and love us.

And when we do that---when we have emptied ourselves of us and filled ourselves with Jesus---THEN we can "unleash" the love in our hearts and use that joyful enthusiasm to truly change the world.

We go back to that most frequently quoted verse in the Gospels, which we heard this morning: "*For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, so that everyone who believes in Him might not perish, but might have eternal life.*" (Jn. 3:16) THAT is what spiritual stewardship is all about. It is all centered on the Cross, the Tree of Life, the Instrument of our Salvation. Please join me as we

pray: *“We adore You, oh Christ, and we praise You; because by Your Holy Cross, You have redeemed the world.”* Amen!