

LENT3A2018 (First Sunday at St. Andrew's, for scrutiny)

I imagine that many of you followed Pope Francis' pilgrimage to the United States pretty carefully. But you may NOT know of something that happened at the very beginning. As his plane was coming in to New York, it was very much delayed. And he had a very important meeting at the United Nations scheduled. When the Pope got into the Limo, he said to the driver "I'm late for a very important meeting at the UN. The future of the world could depend upon it. Would you please hurry?" "I'm sorry, Holy Father," said the driver. "But I've had 2 speeding tickets and if I get another one, I'll lose my job. I have a wife and 3 small children – surely you understand." The Pope was beside himself with the slow pace of the driver. So when they got to a top light, the Pope jumped out and said to the driver. "Let me drive." And they switched places. So Pope Francis went tearing down the highway into New York City. He was going over 75 miles per hour when he passed 2 NYC cops. One was a rookie and the other an experienced veteran. The older cop turned on his lights and gave chase, saying to his younger comrade: "Just watch this. These big shots think they can get away with anything. By the time I finish with this guy I won't have a single ticket left in my book." They caught up with the speeding pontiff and the veteran officer went up to the car. He was back in a flash, an ashen look on his face. The rookie asked, "What happened? You didn't write him a single ticket!" "Oh, this guy's big. Really big." "Who did you pull over? The mayor of New York City?" "No, bigger than that." "The Governor of New York State?" "No, bigger than that." "You didn't pull over the President of the United States, did you?" "No, bigger than that." "Who in the world is bigger than the President of the United States?" "I don't know – but the Pope is his chauffeur!"

Today we begin the first of three great stories from the gospel of John that form the basis for the scrutinies. The scrutinies are part of the final preparation of the elect for the sacraments they are to receive at the Easter Vigil. As the Rite instructs: "The scrutinies are to uncover, then heal all that is weak, defective or sinful in the elect; to bring out, then strengthen all that is upright, strong and good." (RCIA #141) The rite has a value for all of us, as we all are in need of purification as well, so we will all join them in kneeling and praying for a deepened understanding of sin and grace in our lives.

The scrutiny's three life lessons come to us from three rather unlikely teachers – a disreputable woman at a well in today's gospel, next week a blind man, and the third scrutiny centers around one who has been dead and buried for 4 days – Lazarus. It is consistent with God's penchant for using the least likely people to teach us the most important life lessons; Jesus has chosen ordinary sinners like ourselves to remind us of the blessings that are ours.

So let's begin. What's going on with this woman? Something in all of us strains for fulfillment. We often spend our lives trying to find something that will make us fully and finally, happy. We move eagerly from experience to experience. But nothing ever really seems to satisfy. We look anyway.

Others, though, move like glaciers, slowly and ponderously, deeper and deeper into themselves as the years go by, becoming more and more rigid, more and more disconnected. They are alive. They go on. But, far too often, they simply fail to thrive. They get to the point where they are simply putting one foot in front of the other. They really are dead, but simply too cheap to pay for the funeral! They have stopped living. And they know it.

The missing element in life echoes like a chorus. "If only I had gone to school...." "If only I had not gotten married...." "If only I HAD gotten married..." "If only I had taken that job, not made that investment..."

“If only....”

There comes a point in life when, having stopped living, we decide that life is simply a kind of sour trap and we are stuck in it. We look out from where we are like butterflies behind a plexiglass screen. We cling to life, but we never explore beyond it. As a result, we can see what we’re missing and we resent it, but we don’t know what to do about it.

The LONDON DAILY MAIL carried an article years ago that is a warning to us all. Once upon a time, a certain building became infested with mice. The people in charge decided to exterminate them. One night they put down mouse-killing poison, and the next morning the poison had been eaten, but there were no dead mice in sight. The people changed the poison and made a second attempt. But this second dose the mice also ate and left signs that they were thriving on their new diet. So the people decided to use old-fashioned, spring-operated mousetraps. They baited them with thick pieces of succulent cheese. But the mice refused to touch the cheese. One of the mouse-catchers suddenly had an idea: he coated the cheese in the traps with poison. “Perhaps the mice have developed a liking for the poison,” he said. “It may even be doing them good,” he reasoned. The following morning the spring-traps were full of what once had been strong and healthy mice. The article declared that this was a true story.

The fear is, of course, that we can all learn to live on what is actually poisoning us. We might, conceivably, even appear to thrive on it. “It’s good for us,” we tell ourselves and stuff ourselves with it. Eventually, totally unaware that what we are cemented is slowly killing us or saturating us to the point that whole other parts of ourselves are silently dying, we simply get up every day and keep on going to nowhere that’s really good for us.

Too much of a bad thing may be just as addictive as too much of a good thing. Too much of anything stifles our taste for the rest of life or exhausts our capacity to pursue it. What’s more, it is almost impossible to tell one from the other. Each of them deceives us. Each of them intoxicates us to the point that we can no longer save ourselves from them. But somewhere in the deep center of our souls we know that ‘something is missing from my life,’ ‘this is not good for me.’

It’s the missing part that must be attended to while we still have enough life left in us to respond – or the bad part that must be dropped before it kills us either spiritually or physically.

When life is lived on the physical level alone, when we bound through life like children at a candy counter, grabbing up sensations, living for the moment, and at the same time having gone dead to stimulation of any kind – when it takes another drink, another laugh, another bloody crash in a movie or more sex or another text or FACEBOOK post – we are living wrung-out lives. We are simply looking for something to assure us that we are, indeed, alive. When we know that something is really missing.

When we fail to nourish the soul, to take time for prayer, to challenge our lives to its depths, when we live only for ourselves, we die. Life becomes empty of meaning, hollow in heart. But we are overlooking the wisdom of our Catholic tradition, the pulse of life that beat in the hearts of ten thousand saints down through the centuries.

The missing part of us is what the spiritual life is all about. And the Catholic tradition has always taught us this. We can’t get what we don’t aim for in the right places, by the right means. A life that gives no time to prayer or to God or others than our families, is empty. And we keep looking for something, ANYTHING, to fill it, and most of it is meaningless in a search that is ultimately all about meaning. W E cannot fill ourselves up

with worthlessness and expect to find what is missing in us, or even worse, to know in time how much we are really missing. We are restless for a reason. The Hound of Heaven is calling out to us.

Which brings us to the experience of the woman in today's masterful story from John's gospel. The woman had 5 husbands. How thirsty can you get? Looking for love in all the wrong places. Whether she really had 5 actual men or whether this is a symbolic number representing the gods of the Samaritans, it doesn't matter. The message remains the same. Only with Jesus does she find the fountain of living water. Only with Jesus does she find what will stem the restlessness of her soul. She gets it eventually. "Come and see someone who told me everything I ever did. Could this not be the Messiah?" Yes, it could. In fact, it is.

Once again, the gospel story is our story. This thirsty woman's story is our story. We go from one experience to another looking for something or someone to tell us an easy way, a painless way, to do what we know can only be done with effort. Becoming holy, becoming a saint, which is what we are supposed to be about, is never easy. But there is no other path that is fulfilling. And until we get this right, we will spend a lot of time and money in trivial pursuits.

All of us deal with the temptation in life to settle down where we are, doing what we're doing, no matter how dry the nest, how wrong the tree. We are too often inclined to stay on the same shrub long after the berries that brought us there are gone for us. WE assume that one part of life can nourish us forever, and we let the rest of ourselves remain unnurtured for years. We see that in the high school jock who 20 years later is still trying to live on a winning touchdown at the championship game, the retired CEO who still struts around like he's in charge, the woman whose only definition is as the mother of her children, long after they have all left the house. If we don't know how to move on to what it is that we are truly seeking, we can simply never arrive there. St. John of the Cross had it right when he said, "We cannot live the evening of our lives according to the program of one's morning."

No, we must move on to what truly satisfies the soul, to seek and strive for the One Living God who is the source of everything that we desire. The Church offers us wonderful helps as we go through life. Prayer, fasting, almsgiving is our Lenten program – always. And we have the Scriptures, the Sacraments, and these scrutinies to guide us in our walk toward the God who is ever calling out to us.

In our own way, we are all seeking our destiny. Drawn by our desires, we eventually must yield to the truth that it is God alone that can satisfy the deepest cravings of the human heart. God is our ultimate end and our destiny.

If the question is, Why does it feel like something is missing in my life? The answer is because the feeling of emptiness is meant to move us on beyond where we are now to the fullness of life we were put on this earth to discover. The woman at the well found it in the One who is a spring of water welling up to eternal life. Have we? (help from Joan Chittister, WELCOME TO THE WISDOM OF THE WORLD, p. 162-166)