

JULY 8, 2018

Fourteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Reading 1 **EZ 2:2-5**

Responsorial Psalm **PS 123:1-2, 2, 3-4**

R. (2cd) **Our eyes are fixed on the Lord, pleading for his mercy.**

Reading 2 **2 COR 12:7-10**

Gospel **MK 6:1-6**

Jesus departed from there and came to his native place, accompanied by his disciples. When the sabbath came he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were astonished. They said, "Where did this man get all this? What kind of wisdom has been given him? What mighty deeds are wrought by his hands! Is he not the carpenter, the son of Mary, and the brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon? And are not his sisters here with us?" And they took offense at him. Jesus said to them, "A prophet is not without honor except in his native place and among his own kin and in his own house." So he was not able to perform any mighty deed there, apart from curing a few sick people by laying his hands on them. He was amazed at their lack of faith.

HOMILY:

The churches in the town of Prairie Rapids Crossing worked together to sponsor a community-wide parish mission. After the mission had concluded, three of the pastors were discussing the results with one another. Fr. Stecher said, "The mission worked out great for us! We gained 4 new families." Fr. McDermott said, "We did better than that! We gained 6 new families." The pastor of St. Edward added, "Well, we did even better than that! We got rid of our 10 biggest trouble makers!"

On the move . . . searching for that place to practice faith . . . a perennial instinct: Looking for that place of good preaching, good music, and a friendly church community. Polls make it clear that these are the factors that are cited as folks look for a church family to call their own. Oh, but if it were only an issue of looking for a different church! According to a Gallup poll from this year, 2018, 39% of Catholics reported attending church in the previous week. This continues the steady decline since the polls began in 1955, when to the same question, 75% of Catholics said they had been to church in the previous week. Over the same time range, our Protestant brothers and sisters have remained almost steady at 42%, never varying much more than 3 percentage points in any direction from that average. Where are nearly six in ten of our family of the wider Christian faith on any given Sunday? With the aging of our population, some are actually not able to come to church. But, we all know well that the issue is deeper than that. It is an issue that has been with us since the beginning for us, the children of God, since our Lord spoke to his own in Nazareth in today's gospel. And I believe it can all be summarized, for that age and our age, in the complaint attributed to "many [in his native town] who heard him" and said, "Is he not the carpenter?"

The complaint, "Is he not the carpenter?" suggests something unworthy and disqualifying about a local guy that is "just" a carpenter. The implication: how can Jesus be who He claims to be, when He is in fact, by all appearances, so exceptionally ordinary and so much like us? While our churches do want to keep working on becoming more warm and welcoming, to keep working to offer more engaging preaching, and to keep working on more inspiring music, maybe the more

basic spiritual issue is the same one in Jesus' hometown, encapsulated in those words that ring down the ages, "Is he not the carpenter?" For maybe a given church is seen as just too ordinary, too human, too imperfect. With this being the case, many have asked, "why keep coming?"

Our Catholic tradition holds with firmness that St. Joseph, the foster-father of Jesus, was a carpenter, as is proclaimed about Jesus, as is evidenced in the words of today's gospel. The biblical word for this occupation is τέκτων (*tehton*), more generally a craftsman, artisan, and, especially a carpenter. But the word, in use even earlier from the great Greek poet Homer, then down to the New Testament times, suggested a "begetter," a creator, with hints of the great begetter, the Lord. Our stained-glass window of St. Joseph craftily speaks to this occupation, when it has the carpenter, the human teacher of Jesus, holding two tools, "the square" and the "saw." In order to create, the carpenter needs these two tools. The square is used to make sure that cuts and shapes are literally right, not askew, but orderly and fitting. The saw, of course, is used to remove parts of the material that are obstacles to the final form of the project. As with the human occupation of carpenter, so too with the divine Carpenter, Jesus, who was at work with in his hometown, trying to speak the word of God to them and to heal them. In this, he was truly a carpenter, a begetter, who sought to cut off those parts of the souls of his listeners that were obstacles to their image as children of God, and sought to set them straight and right on the course of godliness. And yet, the complaint, "Is this not the carpenter?," suggests that they did not understand or want someone to reform them, change them, and set them on the course of the children of God, especially another human being like themselves.

I think our struggle, the one that moves 6 out of 10 of our sisters and brothers outside our family of faith on a given weekend, is that we struggle to see the divine Carpenter at work in church or maybe just do not particularly want Him to reshape, reform and excise those parts of us that are not worthy of the children of God, especially when it seems He's using a human instrument (a pastor, a fellow parishioner) to do it. And in many cases, we're tempted to want to shape our spirits ourselves. Too often, we focus on the human instruments of his divine action: That boring preacher; those hypocritical folks, that same old prayer. Yet the Carpenter promised us, when we gather in his name, he will be here. Your pastor is imperfect. Your deacons are imperfect. Your fellow parishioners are imperfect. Other ministers are imperfect. And, here's another truth: so are you. And while we all ought to aspire to perfection, the single truth that matters is that *Jesus is perfect*. He is the perfect Carpenter, ready to beget us, that is recreate us, if we will but come and find him here. And while pastors change, music changes, parishioners come and go, Jesus, ever faithful and merciful, will still be here, as he promised.

So, let us resist every temptation to seek Him elsewhere, when in faith we know that he will be here, in the breaking of the bread, in the Eucharist that He established as the place we can always, really and truly, find His Presence and Life. Of course, the humanity of the church is imperfect! That's why we're here—to be perfected, more and more, by the great and merciful Carpenter. He's right here, ready to reform us into His daughters and sons. And though His word at times can be painful, as it prompts us to sever a part of us that needs to go, His True Presence is ready to heal us and set us on a right course to life. The search can end here, which is really the search of God for us, who is always ready to find us here and shape us into his followers. This is right where we need to be, in the merciful hands of the Divine Carpenter. We don't need to go anywhere else.