

Homily (Pentecost Sunday) – 6/4/2017

If you cannot work out a relationship with a Black Labrador Retriever you do not have any social skills. In fact if you have a problem with this species of dog, you are the one who ought to go to obedience school! These dogs get up in the morning wagging their tails, mouth open, tongue dangling like a slice of ham, panting with excitement as if to say: boy oh boy are we going to have a great day. This dog is safe around children and plays the role of a great companion. Now I have seen how often the Black Lab plays another role; that of a guide dog. These animals can be trained to serve those who are sightless, or physically incapacitated. Someone told me the training service dogs receive. There is this exercise which helps bond the animal to their master. They do not feed the black lab anything to eat for two days. Then they put the dog 15 feet away from the master. Every five feet they put some meat to eat. The master calls for the dog. When the black lab is able to go straight to their master without stopping to sample the food, they are ready to graduate. The dog's whole world focuses on their master, they are bonded to this one person.

I have been thinking about these guide dogs. How they are modern images of the Holy Spirit. They are bonded to guide this person with these specific limitations. In baptism the Spirit's bonded to us, with our specific disorders. If a sightless person comes to a street crossing, the dog's body won't budge. Signals to the master don't go there. God's Spirit often communicates "don't go there." If the guide dog's owner falls to the ground the animal's taught to offer their harness. Pulls back and pick the person up. The Holy Spirit is all about picking ourselves back up, especially when we stumble spiritually. A person who suffers from a breathing problem, can use the animal to wake them up from sleep in a medical emergency. The Holy Spirit alerts when we are spiritually asleep. Will the image of a dog replace the image of a dove symbolizing the Holy Spirit? No, but why was a dove chosen to symbolize the Spirit?

Blame it on Noah and the Ark and the flood story in the Old Testament. Due to sin God flooded the world. Recall when Noah wanted to check and see if the waters had receded and there was land? He sent out a Raven and it came back unable to have alighted on anything. Then he sent out the dove and it came back with a freshly plucked olive branch in its beak.

Noah knew then that there was land and God had begun creation again. So too, when Jesus was baptized in the Jordan. A dove appeared over his head signaling God's Spirit. A new human creation happened in Jesus. But the life of Jesus was not a 33 year experiment. Every baptized person shares with Jesus that same, exact Holy Spirit.

You know in the Eastern Catholic Church the Spirit is called the other hand of God. Jesus is the first hand. Trying to follow Jesus without the Holy Spirit is like having one hand tied behind your back. Imagine me celebrating mass like that? See this cross of Jesus holding out the dove. It is more than pious symbol. Jesus is saying I could not have made it without the Spirit, neither can you.

We like to think that Jesus never doubted, he did. We like to imagine Jesus never questioned God's love, he did. We like to think trust came automatic to Jesus, it didn't. That is why Jesus strongly suggests we become familiar with the Spirit. Learn the Spirit's ways with you , especially in face of temptations. Have a certain word or words almost like a mantra freeing yourself to step back. Go within yourself and ask the Spirit for guidance.

Look we all suffer from the wound of original sin. And that wound breeds all sorts of disorders. That wound gives birth to all kinds of addictions. So, it is not a question of if we are tempted, but when. I know of one man who when tempted applies this saying: "Am I being my best self if I act this way?" Is this behavior the best version of myself?"

We can always tell if we are following the Holy Spirit by this simple exercise. When you walk toward the sun, where does your shadow fall? It falls behind you. When you walk with the sun behind you where does your shadow fall, ahead of you. When you turn your back on the Holy Spirit, life looks dark and hopeless. You end up agitated and not at home in your own skin. When you walk in companionship with the Spirit, life looks brighter, hopeful. There is still a bounce in your step. Now the Holy Spirit does not make life's challenges and problems go away. You might have to let go of some cherished fantasies about yourself. Psychiatrist said "If you want to stop a person from growing, prevent them from grieving." You might have to grieve. Why is grieving sometimes necessary in following God's Holy Spirit. A story might help.

A friend told me how as a young girl doing her homework, she would sometimes sit with her back to the window or to the lamp light. Her parents would complain "you are sitting in your own light." She would reluctantly turn to the light and of course it made a big difference. We are familiar sitting in our own light, have done it for most of our lives. In effect we say God "I am the center of my universe, I am the sun, you are just one of many planets out there."

We must learn to radically shift our focus. We revolve around the One who is the Source of our life. We are the planets, God is the Sun. So to follow The Holy Spirit we might have to give up our place in the universe.

What is the take home message: It does not matter whether you think of the Holy Spirit as a Black Labrador Retriever dog guiding you, or whether you think of the Holy Spirit as a dove making a new creation of you. Or whether you imagine the Holy Spirit as the sun in the sky you are walking toward or away from. The important thing is you are going to need God's Holy Spirit. You have Jesus' word on it. And he never would have sent us the Spirit, unless we are to use it.