**Homily – 26th Sunday – Cycle B – St. Polycarp Church**

Two things come to mind as I preach this farewell homily. First, during his pastoral visit to Hungary two weeks ago, Pope Francis mentioned that homilies should be limited to ten minutes. I couldn’t think of a better way to say “farewell” than by doing just that, hoping to see a smile on everyone’s face. I’m going to ask Siri for help: *“Hey Siri, set a timer for 10 minutes.”*

Second, I thought I would construct this homily like a Pauline letter to one of his small faith communities he founded. So, here goes!

Paul, a priest of Jesus Christ by the call and will of God, to the holy ones and faithful followers of Christ in Smyrna, grace to you and peace from God our merciful Father.

I give thanks to God for the abundant graces I received the past six years gathering with you to renew our Catholic identity in the sacraments. In preaching Jesus’ gospel of life, I have come to claim him more as my savior and to love you more as fellow sinners, embraced by a loving God. Together, we have walked a path of spiritual growth in our vocation to claim the divine graces to be missionaries of mercy, to be walking tabernacles of his divine presence to others.

The readings today challenge us how to get better at those pieces of our Christian identity. The story in the Book of Numbers tells a vulnerable moment in the life of Moses. He complains to God that leading the Israelites has been a heavy burden for him, alone. God intervenes! He bestows some of the divine Spirit on 70 elders. Their job description is to persuade the people to follow the Lord and the divine teachings of the Covenant with delight and integrity.

Two elders, Eldad & Medad, were on the list but absent from the meeting Tent. Joshua is concerned that they are prophesying “in the camp” without being officially “installed.” Joshua is hung-up on being “liturgically correct.” He pleads with Moses to stop them. But Moses, sees a larger picture. He has learned, as the deliverer and prophet, that the Hebrew God traditionally acts in untraditional ways. In this instance Moses sees a deeper divine desire that all the Lord’s people live as spirit-filled prophets. Not just those within the tent, a.k.a. within the church building, but out “in the camp”, a.k.a. in the marketplace of the world. Pope Francis calls such prophesying as “being infected with the holiness of God.”

In the letter of St. James, he links his understanding of prophetic living with how his community treats and behaves their fellow members. Rather than condemning business people or enterprising members of his community, James is encouraging them to examine the integrity of how they give witness to Jesus by their treatment of one another. He is prophesying when he reminds the rich, who have accumulated wealth and excesses, unjustly, that God hears the cries of their mistreated workers, and is planning justice for them. It’s a wake-up call to those business men that their behavior is condemning them to eternal destruction. St. James is taking his role as prophet serious.

The Gospel reminds us that the Kingdom of God is larger than the Church. In God’s kingdom, the Spirit cannot be boxed, but works uniquely, and in an infinite variety of people.

The disciples are at a stage of formation where they have been seduced to believe they are an exclusive club --- controlling where and how the Spirit moves and acts. Last week we heard about the disciples one-upping themselves; squabbling about which one of them was the greatest. This week we find them doing the same thing.

Their jealousy about a stranger who spoke in Jesus’ name is another version of the misguided competition often played out in faith communities. The disciples wanted him stopped because he wasn’t qualified or “Orthodox” enough to heal others. Jesus’ response to this arrogance is, “whoever is not against us, is for us.”

He uses a child to teach a lesson about discipleship. A child is a “little one” – innocent, humble. In this patriarchal culture children were unnoticed, had not developed a language to speak for themselves, they had no legal rights. All the more to treat them with dignity. The message of Jesus is: *those who provide for their simplest needs, receive divine, not just human, rewards.* In other words, children are special to God and those who care for them gain God’s attention and favor. This is a lesson about standing against the culture and being prophetic about nurturing the faith development of children. They awaken in adults an inner child, a “growing down” into order to mature in faith. After all, it’s the adults who will be held accountable.

Here is a story that gives punch to that truth. *O. Henry is well known for the surprise endings of his stories. One story concerns an emotionally starved child. She’s always asking her father if she can sit on his lap. He always pushes her away, saying, “Go outside and play.” The inevitable happens: The girl grows up to become a prostitute. When she dies, St. Peter says to Jesus: “We’ve got a really bad one coming today!” Then comes the surprise ending. Jesus says to St. Peter, “When she comes open the wide the gates of heaven for her; but when her father comes, hold him accountable for her life.”*

Allow me to add a Coda:

In my six years among you, I have preached often about upholding the dignity of every person and forgoing using labels or judgments that actually cheapens our dignity. I leave you the same as I came six years ago: a SINNER. I ask you, brothers and sisters, to pray for me. When we lift one another up in prayer then we realize that we are all maimed and broken, but capable of proclaiming the reign of God.

I have one regret as I leave. I am sorry I did not raise the parish profile by being selected as a a candidate for “Bachelor in Paradise.” Good ahead and laugh. Surely you know me well enough that I have no interest in the plastic, fantasy Paradise of Hollywood. I’m staking my life and gifts and vision on an eternal Paradise. Until I enter it, I encourage you to prophesy the gospel of life with joy, and may the God of love and peace be with you. Amen.