

PREACHING WITH OUR LIVES

One of the songs from the Edgewood College story that we did not sing last night includes a delightful chorus about Sr. Nona McGreal—first full-time president of the College: “Whatever Nona Wants Nona Gets.” When Phil Martin composes the next act of the EC story to cover the Carey years, he can borrow that musical theme and simply change the name to describe the one whom I lovingly refer to as my Reverend Mother. Whatever Maggie wants—Maggie gets. She never takes “No” for an answer so when she came up with the idiotic notion that I join a few of the presidents this morning to talk about Preaching with Our Lives I knew it was useless to continue to suggest others who are better equipped and trained than I—for she knows I am “neither as humble nor as generous as I make myself out to be.”

I am not a vowed Dominican. There is no “OP” after my name (though I am tempted at times to sign my name with “OLP” ordinary lay person). I studied with Franciscans in grade school, Salesians in high school, Benedictines in College Seminary... What do **they** know about preaching?

I never even met a Dominican until I got to Notre Dame for graduate school where I studied with Neils Rasmussen (+1987) and Tom O’Meara (Central Province)--and had the great joy of working with Jan Schlicting (Akron Dominican) in the Notre Dame Center for Pastoral Liturgy and Paul Philibert (Southern Province)in the Center for Church Life. Now I am starting my 15th year rubbing shoulders and butting heads with these Sinsinawans. So I have to admit that I have learned by osmosis that the most effective preaching is what you do with your life. So What AM I preaching with my life and WHAT is the message I am sharing?

Jan Schlicting used to say all the time that “Good preaching is quite simply one beggar telling another beggar where to find bread!” And I think it was Tom O’Meara who said, Preaching is what happens whenever you realize that you have seen GRACE—God’s very Self-- Present and Acting in the world.

Preaching then is not simply telling people what you have grasped intellectually—it’s sharing with them the incredible discovery of BREAD--of GRACE--that gives you life! Real life, not pie-in-the-sky-when-you-die life, not escape from disappointment and pain, but life to the full with all its “joys and hopes, its griefs and anxieties” filled to overflowing.

Sometimes—at least when Reverend Mother requires it--you have to put it into words. But most of the time your attitudes and actions reveal what is feeding you --or “eating you up”-- whether you are aware of it or not.

So if I am preaching with **my** life, I have to identify what it is that feeds me and has fed me. Where do I find bread? Where have I seen GRACE?

Literally and physically, I bake bread. 95% of the bread that I eat comes out of my oven and this has been the case since grad school when kneading bread dough proved to be inexpensive therapy for the hypertension and less than charitable complaining occasioned by the unreasonable expectations of a certain Danish Dominican of the French Province: ... Requiescat in Pace!

But, to borrow an expression that I learned from Paul Philibert, my “religious imagination was landscaped” by BREAD from the earliest days of my life. Long before--and for many years after I made my first communion on October 11, 1964, I was at church almost every Friday and Sunday afternoon for some novena, rosary, stations of the cross or special devotion which concluded with BENEDICTION OF THE BLESSED SACRAMENT. I was captivated by all those candles and the incense, the strange and holy sounds of the Latin Hymns and the gorgeous gold and white of the cope and humeral veil—you know

me and costumes. But what touched the deepest part of my soul was the contemplative focus and tangible reverence with which my parents and grandparents, and all these ordinary people from my neighborhood, made the sign of the cross as Monsignor Hildebrandt picked up that monstrance and with great solemnity and the ringing of bells, blessed us with a piece of Bread-- a Piece of Bread that we knew to be—in all reality--the saving, healing, incredibly awesome, loving presence of God.

I was hooked—and still am. I wanted nothing more and would settle for nothing less than becoming a priest and—besides wearing those vestments-- I really did want to be close to and learn everything I could so that I would be able to take, bless, break and share that Holy Bread; and experience that deep sense of God's Presence all the time.

But that Holy Presence had other plans for me. My first year at St. Meinrad seminary—Fr. Aurelius Boberek's pre-Holy Week retreat: I learned for the first time that—unlike Matthew, Mark, Luke and even Paul's Letter to the Corinthians, John's Gospel does not record the Institution of the Eucharist at the Last Supper. Instead, as you all know, John records "footwashing." I was embarrassed that I hadn't realized this before. But Aurelius went further: he insisted that the writer of John's Gospel had done this on purpose to make a very important theological statement—and one that I am still unpacking 33 years later.

Fr. Aurelius drew a straight line on the chalkboard and said, "this is what we look like when we stand at the altar: then we accept the gift of bread in our hands, acknowledge the gift by blessing God, break it and share it and we end up like this" and he drew a horizontal line and of course we saw the cross. Then he drew another straight line and said, this is what we look like most of the time outside of Mass, but in order to wash someone's feet, what happens to the 'line'? It gets broken and it is in the breaking of our bodies in service that God's saving, healing, incredibly awesome, loving Presence is revealed. It's the same God: the taking, blessing, breaking and sharing of the Gift of the Eucharist inside the Mass MUST be embodied, en fleshed, sacramentalized in the taking, acknowledging, breaking and sharing of the Gift of our lives. "Love one another as I have loved you" clarified by "so you too must wash each other's feet" is the same commandment as "Do this in memory of me." Everyone who breaks and shares their own gifts, their own bodies, in loving service of others is—according to John's Gospel—is being the Eucharist in the world!

WOW! Footwashing /Serving others is actually just as important as confecting the Eucharist and we know how important that is! By that time in my life I knew and admired quite a few priests --Diocesan, OFM, OFM Cap., SDB, OSB (and more than a few SOB's), who knew how important the Breaking of Bread was for the life of the world. But I knew hundreds of OLP's (LAITY) who, like me had never once heard anyone tell them that they were celebrating the Eucharist when they bent their bodies in service of another! They were being Bread Broken for the life and salvation of the world.

I thought of my mother first! She had recently written a letter informing me that our Monsignor had asked her to become a Eucharistic Minister and she honestly didn't feel worthy... a woman who had birthed 12 babies and broke the line of her body cleaning, cooking, picking up, getting down on her hands and knees to play with us and teach us to pray--to say nothing of well over a million dirty diapers (no wonder they call it holy shit!). I couldn't wait to get home for Holy Week! I knew for the first time what Jeremiah felt when he said there was a message burning inside. The six hour drive from St. Meinrad seemed interminable. When my classmate finally drove up in front of our house I jumped out of the car leaving my dirty laundry for him to bring in after me. I rushed into the kitchen, grabbed my mom and dragged her to her bedroom, closed the door, sat her down and with tears in my eyes I said

“Mother, I am about to tell you the most amazing thing in the world: you are the holy Eucharist!” She said “WHAT on earth are you talking about!” “Well, not exactly the Holy Eucharist...” And I proceeded to tell her everything that I had learned on that retreat. My mother looked at me incredulously and said quite simply; “why didn’t anyone ever tell us this before?”

My heart swore at that moment that I would spend the rest of my life telling everyone this incredibly wonderful and important news: **Their** lives were every bit as important and valuable as the Pope’s, the Bishops’, the Priests, and the vowed Religious because God was using their lives and their love as vehicles-- as sacraments--of God’s life and God’s love... And for the vast majority of people on this earth, that’s the only way they are ever going to experience that Presence, that Grace, that Bread.

It took a few more years for me to realize that I would re-join the OLP’s and find myself making, baking, breaking and sharing bread as a way of life and a way to life.

It is the nature of food that it should be eaten.

It is the nature of food that it should be consumed.

Bread is not bread for its own sake, but to give life to the Hungry.

Drink is not drink for its own sake, but to give refreshment and joy to the thirsty.

But sharing bread and drink transforms the eaters into companions—literally, those who have eaten bread (pan) with (cum) each other.

When Jesus of Nazareth took bread and wine and gave them to his disciples, he expressed this perfectly: bread that all might have life, wine that all might be glad, broken/poured out and shared that all might be companions. He is a banquet for us that we, in turn, may be bread for the world.

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