

ὁ λόγος παρακλήσεως
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St. Thomas, Glassboro – Todd Foster
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Joy and Grumbling

In nomine...

I. Intro

I was speaking at an Interfaith event on campus last week and I asked a group of freshman who showed up why they were there. “We were bored.” It’s an honest answer. But of all the places they could have gone on campus, what was it that inspired them to show up at an Interfaith event, something concerned with faith and spirituality?

Who was it that introduced *you* to Christianity? And what was it about their faith that inspired you to follow in their footsteps? Or maybe you don’t always consider yourself a believer in Christ; even so, what was the impulse that brought you in to church today?

I like to reflect often on those who inspired faith in me. Mr. Moore, who served my parents’ church faithfully for nearly 50 years. Mrs. Swanson who brought energy and enthusiasm to teaching an unruly group of middle-schoolers. I remember one night we had a special activity in the church library, and the atmosphere became so thick with heat and humidity and the smell of sweaty socks, that we would occasionally stick our heads out into the hallway to get some fresh air! That’s the kind of thing Mrs. Swanson endured on an ongoing basis, leaving us with the firm conviction that we were loved and it had something to do with Jesus.

I think of my friends in the Baptist Student Union who helped me move into my dorm and then took me out dancing my first night at Virginia Tech. And I think of my campus minister, Roy, who endured endless undergraduate madness as he nurtured others and me into a blossoming adult faith. Roy was the person who first saw and spoke into being my own trajectory toward ordained ministry.

Many other names come quickly to mind: people I have considered mentors and friends, people who drew me in and attracted me to Christianity. None of these people did that by arguing with me. None of them did it by condemning me or making me feel bad. They all did it by inviting me into their lives. They did it by allowing me to see their passion for God. And the thing that was most attractive in these was their joy. Their joy was something I coveted for myself. Their joy was what *still* convinces me, time again, to *turn* toward God.

II. Thesis

Today's Gospel reading has a couple great parables, but they're told in the context of a conversation Jesus has with the Scribes and the Pharisees. And what struck me in hearing the Gospel read was the different emotional content, the emotional *disconnect*, between the religious people and God, the object of their religious striving. The *sinner*s and the tax collectors were turning toward Jesus. But we learn that the Pharisees and the Scribes were grumbling – just when heaven was rejoicing.

Grumbling is a freighted word in the Bible. It's a theological term. It was symptom of rupture between God and God's people. Grumbling does not bode well for any community: it tears apart relationships and creates enmity. It's the opposite of gratitude. And gratitude is known by religious and irreligious people alike as a *key* to happiness and wellbeing.

When the religious people see Jesus hanging out with, inviting into conversation, blessing people who weren't religious, or who were excluded because of their politics, their crude habits, their refusal to toe the line of conventional piety or morals, the religious folks were offended. They grumbled and complained and let Jesus know that his behavior was simply unacceptable.

What Jesus explains by the use of the parable of the lost sheep and the parable of the lost coin, is that what the religious people are grumbling about is, in fact, a cause of rejoicing in heaven. In their *grumbling*, ironically, the religious people are setting themselves up directly against that which they claim to be seeking in their religious practices. Jesus invites them to re-evaluate their practice and commitments. Jesus invites them also to turn and to align themselves with heaven in their hopes and expectations.

III. Good News

If you were here a few weeks ago when Fr. Chuck preached, he talked about the difference between religion and faith. When I have encountered people seriously engaged in the spiritual journey, the journey of faith, I instinctively know these are people I want to follow. And usually I can tell who they are by their joy, their contentment, their gratitude, their trust. It's infectious. Their spirit is closely aligned with the spirit of God, and that's exciting to me. That's what I want in my life!

We practice religion in order to cultivate in ourselves the practices, the habits, the commitments that lead us to faith, to spirituality. We worship, we pray, we serve in order to train ourselves into a spiritual way of being. The things we learn, the things we do, the things we say are all part of the process of growing into alignment with God's kingdom and living in community with God.

Let me give you an example: If what you truly desired in life was to be a marathon runner, chances are pretty good you could do it. It doesn't matter how old you are or how out of shape you are. If your joints still work, then with proper guidance and determination, chances are good you could work your way up to running a marathon by exercising, by eating good food in appropriate quantities, by training all the muscles and joints of your body, and by mental preparation as well. You would find your preparation gets *far, far* easier as you discover communities of people working toward the same goal that you're seeking. Suddenly your friends would be runners and healthy eaters, and you would inspire one another with the things you learn and figure out on your way toward the goal of running a marathon. You would especially value other runners who have the same particular struggles the handicaps that you do in their pursuit of the goal. And probably the ones you would pay the most attention to are the ones who have run or are closest to running a marathon. Because your goal is to be like them.

The spiritual life resembles marathon running in lots of ways. Most of us have some extra fat in our spiritual lives that just isn't helping us reach our goal. Most of us consume some spiritual junk food that keeps us from reaching our goals quite as quickly. Most of us find that spiritual seeking in community is a lot easier than trying to do it on our own: Christian faith is by nature a communal endeavor. And ultimately, it's those people in our lives who manifest the joy, the contentment, the gratitude, and the trust that are the marks of healthy spirituality that we most

want to be around. Because in acquiring their habits, their dispositions, their practices, and their commitments, we hope and expect to find the same ends that they seem to be finding.

IV. Invitation

I want to learn to smile and laugh like Chuck. I want to exude peace and contentment like Jack. I want to bring insight and wise counsel and care for others like Kevin. I want to offer the kind of warm, open spiritual invitation that Vicki always offered to me. Because I encountered Jesus in each of these, my own, personal heroes of the faith. And I want to be one, too. I want to rejoice at the things that set heaven rejoicing – and leave the grumbling to someone else.

Grumbling or joy – which of those are you looking for? What are you learning at church and in your private spiritual practices at home? For what kind of spiritual journey are you in training?

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